
Editor's Comments

Three topics are covered in this issue's statement. First, the publication of the fifth joint SIM/MISRC study on "Key Issues in Information Systems Management" is introduced. Second, some of my very personal views on the "state" of IS scholarly research are provided. Third, as usual, announcements conclude this editor's statement.

SIM/MISRC "Key Issues" Study

I am pleased to note that included within this issue are the findings from the latest joint SIM/MISRC "Key Issues in Information Systems Management" study. The *Quarterly* is proud to again be the vehicle through which these findings—of interest to both practitioners and IS researchers—are communicated to the IS Community.

Because the meaningfulness of these findings is extremely time-dependent, our objective was to publish this article as quickly as possible while maintaining the *Quarterly's* high standards regarding accuracy in the reporting of a study's methodology and findings. The decision was thus made to publish the study's results in as objective and straightforward a manner as possible, with the authors being asked to minimize their interpretation and discussion. To do otherwise would have most certainly resulted in an extended review process and delayed the publication of the findings.

IS Research: Issues and Contexts

As an avid reader of IS scholarship and a frequent observer of IS "best" practices, I wish to offer three observations about the "state" of IS research. First, the good news. I truly believe the quality of IS research continues to improve in very significant ways. A much broader array of research methods is being (appropriately) applied, often within the same study. Further, IS researchers are increasingly applying rich theoretical frames and, where appropriate, utilizing rigorous analytical methodologies. Such statements could not have been made as recent as 10 years ago. My second and third observations are not as positive. When I examine recent issues of IS journals (including *MIS Quarterly*), I continue to be frustrated by the relative "sameness" of the research topics (the terminology might change somewhat to reflect the current "buzz," but the underlying issues seem quite static) and the lack of studies that reflect and describe today's IT management and IT use contexts.

The fact that particular IS research issues reappear is neither surprising nor undesired. Many of the phenomena involved in the successful management and use of IT are complex and may never be fully understood. Consider, for example, the following issues: What methods should be applied in the process of designing an information system such that it meets current and future business needs at a reasonable cost? How does a firm enact architectural standards in a manner to enable connectivity but not inhibit innovation and the assimilation of new technologies? What is the nature of education, training, and organizational learning required for an organization's members to envision the possibilities that new technologies enable within their firm's business processes and strategies? IS researchers were investigating such questions 10 years ago, they are asking them today, and most likely will be asking them 10 years from now. Obtaining an improved understanding of such phenomena—which are driven by the concerns of practice—is most certainly a desirable objective of IS scholarship.

What leads to my frustration are studies examining IS research issues driven not by the concerns of practice but rather by the institution represented by the IS research literature. Consider, for example, the following constructs: end-user computing, user participation, IS strategic planning, user satisfaction, requirements analysis, and prototyping. (There is no hidden motive here. I could have used other examples but these first come to mind, most likely because they appear in many of my own publications.) It is rare to pick up any issue of an IS scholarly journal and not find such constructs to populate article titles.

Do such constructs have rich traditions (made evident by lengthy literature reviews) in the IS research literature? Most certainly! Do such constructs produce a resonance when raised in the presence of practitioners? Most unlikely! Has the IS research community reached consensus on the nature of these constructs, how they are defined, or what they represent? Not to my knowledge.

I certainly do not advocate the elimination of such constructs in IS research. It would be difficult to study, let alone talk about, the design of an information system, or the setting of standards, or technological visioning without the use of these or other of the many constructs created and evolved through IS scholarship. They are certainly part of our collective vocabulary; and rich theoretical models and research instrumentation must be developed by IS scholars in order to better understand and apply the constructs in our research. *But, these constructs are not in themselves the phenomena that we should be studying!* Rather, they reflect particular perspectives or frames or concepts we apply in pursuing our research and in interpreting our findings with regard to related research initiatives undertaken by others. The phenomena we primarily study must instead reflect the concerns (i.e., the objectives, constraints, opportunities, problems, lessons, questions, etc.) of practice.

This line of reasoning leads directly to my third observation: much of the published IS research just does not communicate the realities of today's business and IT contexts. Today's technologically accelerating and globally competitive marketplaces are creating very unique demands on the technical and business environments faced by IT professionals, IT managers, and IT executives as well as their business counterparts. Often, articles published in current issues of IS scholarly journals read—in terms of the technical and business contexts that are being described—as if they could have been written 10 or 15 years ago. It would make an interesting experiment to have subjects guess the date that a random set of IS articles were written. In many cases, there are very few cues other than stated time-lines or journal citations. In my opinion, this lack of attention (or, is it a lack of concern?) with context is but a reflection of the reality that many IS researchers are applying faulty processes in both selecting the phenomena they study and designing their research projects.

What do I recommend to counteract this situation? It is actually quite simple—IS researchers should generally refrain from using IS scholarly journals as the primary source of ideas for new research efforts. There are two lines of reasoning behind this statement. First, the lengthy times involved in both producing a manuscript (designing and carrying out the research effort, crafting a manuscript, etc.) and in moving a manuscript through the review processes of scholarly journals suggests that many, if not most, published articles are quite “old” when they are published. Second, as argued above, the impetus behind much of the current published work lies with prior IS research literature rather than the concerns of practice. What, then, should IS researchers use as likely sources for new research projects? Sadly, there are no “silver bullets.” While a number of useful sources of information exist (practitioner-oriented journals or periodicals, practitioner-oriented conferences, practitioner-oriented professional societies, advisory panels for academic programs, recruiters, personal industry contacts, etc.), they each tend to reflect particular biases. Ideally, by maintaining links with many of these sources, an IS researcher can synthesize the cues being transmitted, develop a useful gestalt regarding the relative importance of the many issues that are raised, and develop a working understanding of (1) the nature of the enduring phenomena of interest to IS practitioners and (2) the more temporal issues likely to be of interest to practice over the next three-to-five years.

What are some examples of research topics “driven by the concerns of practice”? Because any list would be incomplete, I hesitate to even offer suggestions. Still, the “key issues” identified in the fifth joint SIM/MISRC study certainly provide a rich source of ideas. Similarly, the recent SIM Advanced Practices Council Request for Proposals described five topics of specific interest to one set of senior IS executives:

1. **Funding and supporting the continual evolution of an enterprise's desktop technology.**
What strategies and practices are firms applying to cost-effectively, and continuously, evolve their desktop environments?

2. **Recruiting, developing and retaining a world-class IT staff.** It is increasingly being recognized that yesterday's human resource, training, career development, and remuneration practices may no longer apply. However, a number of firms are able to recruit, develop, and retain a highly competent IT staff. What are they doing? What seems to work (under what conditions), and what doesn't seem to work? In particular, what practices are most effective in anticipating and responding to changes in skill-sets and work environments?
3. **IT coordination mechanisms for global companies.** What are the most critical IT activities for successful global companies? And, what types of coordination mechanisms are proving most useful for these critical IT activities?
4. **Understanding the end customers' needs and problems.** Most of the methodologies and techniques devised to elicit users' information needs and to understand the users' work contexts have (implicitly) been developed with a firm's internal customer in mind. Are these methods and techniques appropriate in designing IT-enabled business platforms for a firm's end customers?
5. **Financial issues associated with long-term, IT-enabled business investments.** Major IT-enabled business initiatives are often characterized by lengthy development cycles and substantial IT investments. What innovative accounting and budgeting practices are being applied to enable firms to cope with such investment situations? And, at the opposite end of the development cycle, to what extent are post-implementation audits of these anticipated benefit streams being performed? What measures are being used, how is the information generated from these measures used, and are the expected benefits in fact being attained?

It is noteworthy that, for the most part, these topics are really not "new" to IS research or practice; however, what is new is the framing of the phenomena in today's technological and business contexts.

Let me conclude with three suggestions and a request. Suggestion 1: View the selection of new research topics as the single most important task you face as a scholar. Don't "fall into" a project. Your time is your most valuable resource, and you really cannot afford to invest effort into projects that have low publication likelihoods. Suggestion 2: Try to anticipate the interest a topic might receive five years from now—this is when you are likely to be attempting to "market" any manuscripts derived from this research. Topics that are "hot" today may possess very short half-lives, particularly if they are tightly linked to our accelerating technology. Suggestion 3: Look to practice to identify new research topics; and only after you have committed yourself to a particular topic should you look to the IS research literature as you begin to involve your thoughts regarding the topic.

And now, the request. Given the vagaries and the politics of scholarly publishing in relation to promotion and tenure decisions, senior IS scholars are clearly better positioned than others to pursue research topics that are not based on "institutional" IS research streams (and, in fact, many senior IS scholars—as well as some junior IS scholars—are pursuing such topics). If you are currently working on a "practice-driven" research topic (in the broad areas of IT management and IT use), consider the *Quarterly* as the primary outlet for manuscripts produced from the research. I can assure you that the manuscript will be assigned to an associate editor and reviewers who will view the practice-driven nature of your research as a strength, not as a weakness. Of course, as with all *MIS Quarterly* articles, it is expected that practice-driven research would be theory-based (in contrast to literature-based) and would apply appropriate methods well. And, if you are not currently working on a practice-driven research topic, try it! I look forward to receiving these future submissions.

Announcements

I am pleased to announce that Magid Igbaria (Claremont Graduate School) has accepted a three-year appointment to the Editorial Board. Welcome! With far less enthusiasm, I wish to note that Tom Davenport (University of Texas at Austin) is leaving the Editorial Board after five years of service, including a two-year reappointment. Thanks again, Tom, for all your contributions to the *Quarterly*.

Editor's Comments

One final item. In case you miss it ... if you look closely at the title page of each article, you will find that the accepting senior editor is now named. Hopefully, this information will prove useful to authors in their selection of a senior editor to manage their submission to *MIS Quarterly*.

—**Bob Zmud**
Editor-In-Chief