

Editor's Comment

An enduring challenge in business academic discipline research is correctly balancing the tension between long-term theory development and providing practical action-oriented insights to practitioners. Different business academic disciplines have struck the balance in different ways during the course of their development. Research has begun usually with a wave of practitioner-oriented work, which has then swung more toward theory development, often over-compensating in the short term. The practitioner-oriented work, at the extreme, is often so situationally specific that it is very limited in its generalizability and may — even if well executed — be legitimately criticized at the extreme as being trivial. The theory work, conversely in the extreme, may be so elegant and remote as to give little immediate insight to practitioners and indeed, provide only limited promise of ever stimulating research that could ultimately lead to those insights. This tension is particularly apparent in the MIS field today, and a substantial danger exists that the past fruitful dialogue between academic and practitioner may dramatically erode to the detriment of both. I am concerned that at ICIS I see few of my practitioner associates; conversely at SIM, I see few of my academic associates. A middle ground must be sought to create a balance between both groups, thereby preventing dominance of the research agenda by either side.

The MIS academic researcher faces many pressures that are not well understood by practitioners:

1. The work takes place in universities where the social sciences and natural science disciplines dominate in respectability. (Often, the final tenure decisions are made by committees composed exclusively of individuals with those backgrounds.) Knowledge for knowledge sake is a highly prized commodity in the academy and drives research to the theory end.
2. An extraordinarily long time is required for an academic to develop both mastery of the multiple technical skills associated with the MIS discipline, acquisition of basic methodology skills, and the attainment of broad business administrative perspective. Effective research is in part assessed by his or her associates in terms of how well he or she integrates these skills.
3. The rapid evolution of technology continually produces new opportunities and problems. The time span to conceive a major research project, execute it, and manage the resulting production through the publication process often means the technology and issues studied are already obsolete by the time the results are communicated in terms of their practical impact.
4. The limited number of academic researchers, combined with a continual exit to the commercial sector of many of the most able practitioner-oriented ones, severely constrain the amount of research that can be done in universities.
5. The intense interaction of MIS research issues with those of other fields, e.g., economics, organizational impact, and organizational behavior, puts tremendous pressure on MIS researchers. Unless they become deeply familiar with nuances associated with these fields, there is substantial likelihood that their work will be perceived as trivial or ill-conceived by academics in these allied disciplines. This again lengthens the preparation time for a piece of research.

The practitioner also has problems that are not well understood by the academic. On the one hand, the practitioner has access to important problems and brings energy and commitment to their resolution. These problems, however, are usually multifaceted and intertwined with many dimensions that the academic would prefer not to deal with or to assume away. The real world is infuriatingly messy. Further complicating the issue is that at each level in a person's career, one's perception of the nature of problems changes. A project manager sees reality differently than a chief information officer. Further, the practitioner often labors under extreme short-term performance pressures (i.e., he or she and the firm must be profitable enough to live until tomorrow), which leads him or her to extreme impatience with convoluted theories and the long process required to develop them and apply them to practical problems. He or she has a healthy suspicion of generalized patterns and wants results today.

The *MIS Quarterly* was founded on the principle that the dialogue between these two communities must be maintained and nurtured and the tension between the two constructively addressed. In this

context, it attempts to provide a home for articles of specific interest to each group as well as ones of common interest. The application section is aimed at providing well-researched articles, with insights that can help the practitioner with today's problems. The theory section is aimed at providing articles that contribute to both theory and the improvement of theory. Both the practitioners and the theorists are better off for this collaboration.

To broaden the agenda beyond the *Quarterly*, however, I would like to pose several questions for each group. A negative answer to any of the questions calls for rethinking of one's priorities. For the practitioners:

1. Have you attempted to establish a dialogue with your local academics? Are you familiar with their research agendas? (If you are familiar with them, you may be able to influence them.)
2. Have you volunteered to have your firm used as a research site, or are you exclusively concerned with potential waste of time? (It is an unusual firm that does not find hidden benefits from an in-depth research effort.)
3. Have you structured an honest two-way dialogue with local academics on where your disappointment lies in their academic research, and have you attempted to find a ground of mutual interest (painful in the short run but useful in the long run)?

For the academics:

1. Have you reached out to practitioners and tried to listen to their real problems, or do you filter everything through your own biases? (Are you so concerned with proving your own theory that you reject all other evidence?)
2. Have you spent significant time in business settings to understand the real context within which problems are resolved? (The business world always looks impossibly clean and organized from the perspective of one's campus. Reality is sadly different.)
3. Have you tried to organize your ideas in ways that are intelligible to practitioners, as well as academics? All too often formal jargon seems to dominate our communications. (While helpful in academic settings, it confuses the practitioner.)

As I end my term as Senior Editor, I would like to formally thank three groups: the first, the sponsors, SIM and the University of Minnesota who, while providing financial support and encouragement, gave me full freedom to do what I felt needed to be done; the second, my predecessor Bill King, who left me with both a strong journal and strong manuscript flow, thus giving me the freedom to deal with other issues; the third, my Associate Editors, without whose hard work and dedicated efforts my task would have been impossible.

A particular note of thanks goes to Izak Benbasat, Senior Associate Editor, for both his judgment and energy in many areas, not the least of which was the creation of the special GDSS section for this issue. Finally, my warmest thanks and good wishes go to my successor, Jim Emery, as he takes over the reins.