MIS Quarterly

RIGOR AND RELEVANCE: CAREERS ON THE LINE

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Assistant Professor Marilyn Moore reread the rejection letter from a top tier MIS journal and then added it to the folder containing the letter she had received from another top MIS journal. Moore had graduated from Barker University one year before (June 1996) with a Ph.D. in business administration, majoring in management information systems and decision sciences. She had returned for her Ph.D. in 1992 at the age of 30, driven by her love of teaching and a desire to solve the problems she had seen in the eight years she had worked at a Fortune 100 consumer products firm. While at the firm, Moore had risen

from a programmer to a senior systems analyst and had spent three years working with the firm's corporate training unit.

Immediately before returning to school, Moore had worked on a project to redesign the company's order fulfillment process. The project gained high-level visibility, and Moore had an opportunity to work closely with division-level senior managers in all parts of the firm and with functional managers in the areas of marketing, sales, and operations. Customers and distributors were also a part of the team. As she worked on the project, Moore soon recognized that the technical system design was the least of the problems the team faced. Change management issues, especially those that dealt with the redesign of work and the human side of management, were especially troublesome. On her application to the Ph.D. program, Moore described her interest in conducting research that would identify approaches that managers could take in implementing technology-enabled organizational change.

During her interviews, Moore talked about her research interests with an understanding and enthusiasm that impressed the faculty admissions committee. But when she started the Ph.D. program, those same faculty encouraged her to wait until she had completed at least the first year of her course work before deciding on a research topic. One year later, with her coursework well underway, she approached her previous employer and gained support from management to conduct research on IT-enabled change processes within the company. She then returned to the university to find a dissertation chair only to encounter resistance. The faculty that had discussed her research interests with enthusiasm

during her interviews now criticized the topic as "too broad," "too difficult to operationalize," and "too lengthy" for a Ph.D. research project. They stressed the problems she would encounter trying to "formally define her variables" and ensure "tight control." After she had heard the same argument from all of the senior professors in her department, Moore abandoned her original idea and accepted the invitation of the department chair to conduct an experiment on student subjects that tested communication patterns on electronic mail. The project ran smoothly. She completed her dissertation in less than one year and was hired as an assistant professor at Barker University—her first choice of schools.

Moore spent the summer before she began her first year of teaching writing a paper from her dissertation and submitted it to a top tier journal. The pressures of teaching four courses (two in the fall and two in the winter) kept her from thinking much about the paper until she received a letter in early May informing her that the paper had been rejected. While she received praise for the rigor used in designing the experiment and conducting the research, the reviewers commented that the paper provided few new insights. The narrow scope of the research and the use of MBA students were also criticized. Moore spent the summer rewriting the paper to address the concerns of the reviewers. She revised the introduction to more clearly define the problem that the research was designed to address and created a new section that identified the managerial and academic relevance of her findings. She also added a section on the limitations of her research and mentioned that the use of MBA subjects and the narrowly controlled experimental environment could influence the generalizability of the findings. At the end of the summer, she submitted the new paper to another top tier journal. In early November, she received another rejection letter.

Moore sought advice from her dissertation chair and faculty in her area at Barker. All empathized with her predicament but also advised that it would be difficult to get the paper published in a top tier journal. Her dissertation advisor commented that the topic had been "really hot" several years before but that there had been numerous papers published on this topic over the past few years.

With her tenure clock ticking, Moore returned to the firm she had worked for prior to entering the Ph.D. program. The firm again expressed interest in having her conduct research on IT-enabled organizational change. She sought help from senior faculty in her area to help her design the research project; her doctoral program had not addressed how to design complex, qualitative case-based research. Once again she was discouraged from pursuing this line of "messy field research." Although none of the faculty had conducted field-based case research, they were well aware of the problems with designing a study that adequately operationalized and controlled the variables and relationships of interest. They also pointed out that she might run into the same criticisms of the lack of generalizability of her findings since she was only planning to study one firm. In addition, they knew that field research took time and were concerned that Moore would not have a sufficient number of refereed publications to pass both school of business and university tenure hurdles.

As Moore pondered their advice, she turned to several faculty that she had met at other schools.

Discussion Questions:

1. How common is the situation that Moore faced during her doctoral studies and early assistant professor career?

2. Assuming that all faculty have been genuinely trying to help Moore, what are the issues that they considered in giving their advice?

3. What advice would you have given to Moore as a doctoral student? Incoming assistant professor? What advice would you give her now?

4. What advice would you give to the senior faculty in her area?