

EDITOR'S COMMENTS

Readability and the Relevance Versus Rigor Debate

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The six key journal success factors that were introduced in the March 2008 editorial are (1) paper cycle times, (2) quality and usefulness of the reviewing, (3) readability of the articles, (4) managerial implications of published work, (5) policy constraints, and (6) quality of the papers. We have previously covered factors #5 and #6. In this issue, we will focus on readability (#3) and managerial implications (#4). We will leave issues #1 and #2 for exploration in future editorials.

I have asked Professor Soon Ang, the Goh Tjeoi Kok Chair Professor in International Management and IT at the Nanyang Business School, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore, to join me on this editorial since the argumentation here builds on much of our previous mutual work.

Seemingly unrelated topics, the title of this editorial presumes to be about ease of reading and managerial relevancy. What, *mirabile dictum*, do these have in common? They are, indeed, disparate in appearance, but in a strange way they are, in fact, logically connected. Here is the thread of argument. The first editorial author has posited that top IS journals have bred a culture of rejection which has dimmed our vision and, arguably, not allowed us to always recognize the most exciting ideas in papers by focusing too much on methodological purity. The case goes that we should be focusing on ideas rather than methods.

But ideas are not understandable unless papers are well written. Well written for whom? Our position, which we will try to elaborate in this editorial, is that it should *not* be written well for a managerial audience. It should be written well for scholars.

Bear with us while we pursue this thread.

“Culture” of Rejection

In the culture of rejection at many of our top journals, methods rule. If one can look beyond pure methods to ideas, then it is critical that the ideas are expressed in such a way that they resonate with the readership. Who exactly is the readership of an academic-scholarly journal? One is tempted to say “academics” and “scholars,” and leave it at that, but we are sure that many will protest such cavalier treatment of such a key issue.

Writing “Managerial Implications” sections that are understandable to practitioners is one thing, but do we expect the entire scholarly corpus to be understandable to managers? Let’s hold off on more fully exploring this topic until we have said more about readability of our papers for scholars.

Readability

One way in which a culture of rejection would be least objectionable would be if papers were, indeed, rejected for reasons of readability. If they are not readable, they are not existential or feasibly influential, in a real sense. But this is not the part of the culture of rejection that has been stressed over the last three editorials.¹

If a culture of rejection would be anywhere appropriate, it would be along this dimension. Papers that are not at their heart readable, and, even worse, cannot be made readable by the authors no matter how many revisions or how much help the authors seek out, should be rejected. That is how important it is.

Indeed, it is important enough that we have recently changed the evaluation criteria for articles at *MISQ* in our official evaluation form. It appears as Appendix A. Please note that readability is directly addressed in this form as criterion #4:²

Presentation: *The work adopts a professional style and tone and is concise. It is grammatically correct and clear in its use of figures and tables. The flow of ideas in the paper is logical and there is a clear tie between its use of prior literature and a clear link between the method it adopts and its conclusions. The work is presented at a level of sophistication and length appropriate to the readership of the journal.*

How do we bring this idea to fruition? Other than subjecting the entire field to intensive rhetorical tutorials, what can be done, practically speaking? Our belief is that one way we can drive home this point is by adopting the simple strategy of offloading highly technical material to appendices and online supplements. "Technical material" is defined best by what it is not. The mainline of the paper is the central idea. Like a Chinese emperor's palace grounds, its structures are placed along a center line, with peripheral structures lying to the right and left of it.

Peripheral material in a scholarly article is the scientific apparatus that helps to verify and more fully explain the background and results.

An example here might help. Instrumentation validity is a critical scientific endeavor, but it is rarely the mainline of a paper. If the paper is entirely focused on instrument development, then it is mainline. Otherwise, it supports the knowledge claims of the authors by showing how they were able to create a credible link between abstractions like constructs and measures like scales.

Please understand that we are not arguing in any way that instrumentation validity is not a crucial step in proving rigor in our positivist, quantitative streams of work. The first editorial author, in fact, has spent a large part of his career trying to establish what procedures should be used to undergird rigorous research.

What we are arguing is that highly technical material distracts from the mainline of the story. It can, and should, be discussed briefly in the body of the paper and placed in an accessible location like appendices and online supplements. The added benefit of this approach is that much of the evidence that review teams require but that never makes it into print can now be part of the scholarly record. This is a huge, unexpected advantage of web-supplemented journal archives, in our view.

You can easily surmise what would constitute technical material in other paradigms. In analytical modeling, it would be the long and elaborated derivations and formulations. In qualitative work, it would be the detailed tables and figures that provide the intricate data for interpretation. In design science, it would be supporting architectural drawings that help to elucidate the importance of the IT artifact. And so on.³

¹And hopefully it is not truly a culture, since cultures are nearly impossible to change in the short term. Let us assume (and hope) that it is an attitude and therefore more changeable.

²Also please note that this evaluation form is based on an empirical study of what a diverse sampling of IS scholars valued most in publishable papers.

³It is desirable to be diverse, but surely we also want diverse parts of the community understanding and appreciating the work of other paradigms, and, above all, citing it. When a journal is well cited, it means that people have read the articles in it and have used them in their own thinking about a problem. *MISQ* has enjoyed very high journal impact factors (5.8 in the June 2008 Thomson JIF report), and it is desirable to do everything we can to keep these ratings high. Readability, we would assert, is one way in which this happens.

But if the goal of making our scholarly work readable across the academic discipline is reachable, would it not also make sense to extend this to making our articles both relevant and readable to practitioners? We think not, and discuss this next in the overall context of the relevance versus rigor debate.

Relevance Versus Rigor Debate

Finally, the relevance versus rigor debate. The way this debate is usually couched is as it appears in a fascinating Issues & Opinions article appearing next in this *MISQ* issue. Klein and Rowe's opening gamut (2008) is that "One of the major challenges facing the field of MIS today is to become more practically relevant so that it can better serve its business and public sector stakeholders" (p. 675). Their line of reasoning goes on to link knowledge transfer and the role of journals in facilitating this process: "the usual exhortations that practitioners and academics should attend each others' conferences and study each others' work are meaningless without some fundamental changes in the education of future members of these two communities" (p. 676). We note that Klein and Rowe do not dispute the goal of shared conferences and journals to bridge the gap, but are proposing a solution so that this can happen more effectively.

Two Alleged Gaps

Before proceeding to our own point, we offer a simple framing. The relevance debate can be distilled into two alleged gaps. The first gap relates to the choice of topics or themes that researchers tackle and what practitioners deem to be central to their needs.⁴ The second alleged gap relates to whether research conducted by academics is made accessible to and used by practitioners.⁵

As to the second alleged gap, the *Academy of Management Journal* published a special issue in 2001 that dealt with knowledge transfer from academics to practitioners. In this special issue, Boland et al. (2001) state that "it is a widespread perception that knowledge created by scholars is not used in practice" (p. 393) and go on to cite 12 sources that make this assertion. Hyatt et al. (1997), for example, see a gap between scientists and practitioners, with researchers not seeing value in practitioner research and practitioners not believing that academic research provides relevant solutions. Woodman (1993) uses the phrase "major schism" to describe the alleged gap.

Keeping in mind that the two gaps are in topics and in knowledge transfer, have either of these so-called gaps been scientifically proven? Mohrman et al. (2001) indicate that "There has been relatively little empirical examination and self-reflection about the practical usefulness of various organizational science research approaches, although there have been calls for such activity (e.g., Gergen and Thatchenkery 1996; Mowday 1997)."⁶ Nevertheless, researchers continue to make such assertions, in most cases without citing or analyzing prior studies.

From our perspective, it is even moot to discuss the relevance of top scholarly journals with respect to the second alleged gap. Any academic journal written by researchers for researchers as the primary audience is simply not targeted for practitioners.

Moreover, one reason that practitioners may not read *MISQ* and other scholarly journals, besides the fact that the journal is targeted at topics that differ significantly from those in the trade press, is that the apparatus of scientific reasoning is not familiar

⁴Once again, we believe that academics frame this question in such a way as to find large gaps when, in fact, there may be small gaps or even none. Rynes (2007) reports on a forum of scholars who discuss the mutual impact of scholarly journals on practitioner journals and vice versa. This framing makes a Herculean assumption that the only avenue of influence comes through written forms of communication.

⁵One occasionally sees a third gap alluded to, the lack of knowledge transference from practitioner journals to academics, but this area has not been widely discussed and so we will not raise it here.

⁶In the same *AMJ* special issue, Rynes et al. (2001) make exactly the opposite point: that there is considerable scientific evidence of the gap(s). While it would be interesting to try to resolve exactly what each set of authors meant by *evidence*, our line of reasoning does not depend on this resolution. We will argue that whereas the first gap may exist, it can be readily addressed by redesigning and reconfiguring our scholarly focus in such a way to greatly increase practical and managerial significance. The second alleged gap may not be a gap at all, but in any case even if it were sizeable, it could not be solved by inducing practitioners to read journals like *MISQ*.

to them (Cohen 2007). The entire point of a doctoral degree is to enable readers to follow, to some extent at least, the reasoning of scholarly journals. Doctoral degrees are primarily degrees in research methods and without a thorough infusion of these methods, it is challenging, to say the least, to appreciate the value of a scholarly article.

So there is clearly a gap in expectations about what a scholarly journal offers and what a practitioner reader would most appreciate, and this is why scholarly journals can never directly appeal to practitioners. *MISQ Executive* and other academic-practitioner journals do try to bridge the gap and this is one effective means of bringing the sides closer together, undoubtedly an admirable goal.

Journal Types

Before developing this idea further, however, it may not be entirely clear to readers what we mean by these different types or classes of journals. Journals can be classified into three broad dissemination types based on criteria of differing audiences and methodologies (Adler and Bartholomew 1992). These are (1) academic, (2) practitioner or professional, and (3) academic-practitioner. Written by academics for a scholarly audience, *academic* journals characteristically relate research findings that test theories, doing this through validated research procedures (Julien 1996). These are based on an appropriate and definitive framework of assumptions, definitions, and propositions. Journals designated as *professional or practitioner* are designed for a practitioner audience and more often than not written by journalists, consultants, management head-liners, or professional writers. Such journals dwell on practical issues (Julien 1996). Finally, *academic-practitioner* journals are written by either academics or practitioners, but are pitched mostly at a professional audience (Adler and Bartholomew, 1992). See Appendix B for examples of journals that fall into each of these categories.

Whereas there have been applications of this typology before, a study based on an extensive coding of the outsourcing literature base by Lau et al. (2000) found that these journal types do differ by thematic preference.⁷ Figure 1 shows how the three journal types cluster, indicating that there are distinct clusters for academic (Cluster 1), academic-practitioner (Cluster 3), and practitioner journals (Cluster 5).⁸ There is strong intuitive appeal to these results. Practitioner journals focus on consequences of outsourcing such as the returns of outsourcing investment and organizational performance (see the legend in Figure 1). Academic journals stress definitional issues and causal factors of outsourcing. They debate on meaning and precision of construct definition of outsourcing. They also focus on developing and testing theories of why companies outsource. Academic-practitioner journals tend to focus on prescribing strategic plans, routines, operating procedures, and processes by which companies could outsource effectively. They codify procedural knowledge of companies on how to manage suppliers (vendors) of outsourcing and also other resource issues associated with outsourcing. While there are numerous overlapping themes as depicted in the triangular cluster, Clusters 2 and 4 are positioned between, respectively, two journal types and reveal strong bilateral interests.

We précis this specific research project not for its own sake, but simply to make the point that these various journal types prefer different themes and writing styles, indicating that they are not seeking out the same audiences. The very fact that the journals differentiate themselves in this manner suggests that they are not trying to reach the same audience or transfer knowledge in the way argued by past jeremiads on the need for greater relevance in our academic-scholarly journals.

The Need for More Practical Relevance in Scholarly Articles

So we regard as spurious the arguments that *MISQ* and its like should try to publish papers that master the art of writing directly to practitioners. Without question, there should be managerial implications in our papers, and, in fact, that is now a criterion for

⁷The remainder of this section is heavily based on a working paper by Kelvin Lau, Soon Ang, and Detmar Straub entitled "Knowledge Structures of Academic and Practitioner Discourse: A Content Analysis of the Outsourcing Literature," Nanyang Technological University and Georgia State University, 2000. For copies, please contact the latter two authors.

⁸Of the total inertia in the correspondence analysis, axis 1 explained 62.7% and axis 2 explained the remaining 38.3%, yielding an explained variance of 100%. This may be interpreted to mean that the model was sufficient to explain the total inertia (Clausen 1988; Dangschat and Blasius 1987).

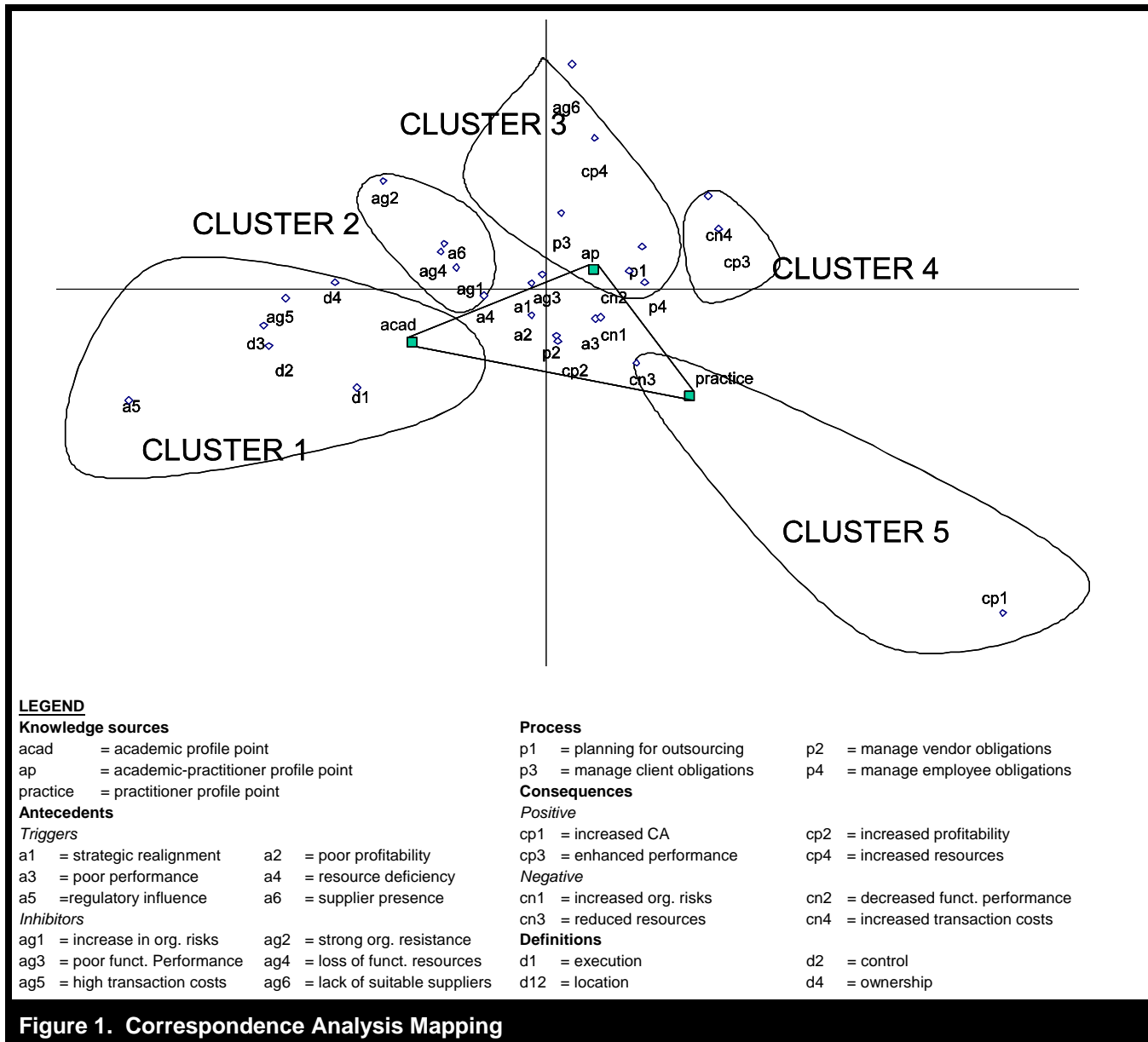


Figure 1. Correspondence Analysis Mapping

acceptance at *MISQ* in our newest evaluation form. Please see Appendix A once again, noting that the second listed criterion is “Practical Significance,” defined as:

The work contributes to our understanding of current technological and organizational problems or challenges faced by IS or other practitioners.

Even though managerial implications are important for vetting scholarly articles, this does not mean that the written word via *MISQ* is the best way, and certainly not the only way, to communicate with practitioners. In our opinion, this oft-repeated assertion is logically flawed. Moreover, it is a red herring.

Does the IS field have an influence on practice? We may, but this influence may not be manifested in the manner in which the debate is usually framed. Moreover, we can readily increase this influence by reexamining the first alleged gap of relevance:

the choice of topics or themes that researchers tackle and what practitioners deem as important for their needs. The Lau et al. outsourcing study cited above shows that practitioners gravitate toward “so-what” and “know-how” information. Practitioners want prescriptions and codified procedural knowledge that will help them implement new processes and solve current real world problems. Academics, on the other hand, prefer to tackle the “know-why.” They provide theoretically meaningful explanation and understanding of a phenomenon. To influence practice, therefore, we could broaden our thematic choices from know-why (explanations) to more of know-how. With time, we will generate more evidence-based management prescriptions to guide managerial practice. Rather than prescribing “snake oil,” and “untested management miracle-cures” (Pfeffer and Sutton 2006a, p. 1), practitioners should judiciously adopt only evidence-based management prescriptions derived from scientifically based evidence culled from carefully conducted social science and organizational research (Pfeffer and Sutton 2006b; Rousseau 2006).

How can we move our research to more evidence-based management prescriptions? Let's continue with our example of outsourcing research. Most organizations today practice or have deliberated on outsourcing at some level in their IT investment decisions. Hence, understanding more about the decision to outsource or not will at best offer marginally incremental information to practitioners. What is missing is a clear understanding of the link between outsourcing and organizational effectiveness. Although organizations may have done due diligence in their decision to outsource, reaping the full benefits of outsourcing remains unattainable. Practitioners under intense pressures to produce bottom-line results would be especially open to understanding ways that could help improve their chances of success. The same could be argued about ERP or other large-scale IT adoptions. The major problem facing practitioners is less whether one should adopt a technology, but how to be assured of reaping the purported benefits from such technologies.

Refocusing our research on outcomes like value creation or firm performance could, therefore, make our research more relevant to practitioners, but this affects only how practically significant we deem our own scholarly work to be and is in no sense a capitulation on the point of whether we should write our articles for practitioners or that practitioners should read scholarly journals.

Reprise

If we continue to frame the argument around whether practitioners read scholarly journals, we will continue to place our attention on the wrong concern about relevance. In point of fact, we seriously doubt that practitioners read academic journals. Nor should they.

If one views the relevance issue through the readership of academic journals (or, vice versa, the readership of practitioner journals by academics), then one would no doubt conclude that there was no influence. But we will argue that this is a misleading way of conceptualizing the issue. Our field's influence on practice is through our courses, continuing education, and popularized articles in journals like *MISQ Executive*. And, perhaps the most important of these, textbooks. As Thomas Kuhn argues in his ground-breaking book on scientific revolutions: “Textbooks [are] pedagogical vehicles for the perpetuation of normal science” (1970, p. 137). He says earlier that “Textbooks themselves aim to communicate the vocabulary and syntax of contemporary scientific language. Popularizations [presumably journals like *MISQ Executive*] attempt to describe these same applications in a language closer to that of everyday life” (pp. 136-137). If one were to measure the impact of the IS field in this way, we might be found to have considerable influence.⁹

But that is not the way this question has been positioned in the past, as evidenced by the Klein and Rowe article following in this issue, and the many complaints about the irrelevancy of our research, especially the work appearing in IS academic journals. In point of fact, IS researchers who have written about this in the past have examined the relevance issue by assessing whether practitioners read *MISQ* and other academic journals or whether the academic journals reflect themes in the practitioner journals (e.g., Szajna 1994). We would assert that such results are not meaningful, first, because it is the wrong framing of the question,

⁹While textbooks are an ideal way to convey scientific ideas, it may be honored more in the breach than the observance in IS. Gordon Davis has often noted that the IS field needs a classic textbook that condenses all the best scientific thinking in the discipline, much as Samuelson did for economics. We have textbooks that have made a good start in this direction, books like Davis' own seminal 1974 text and the update with Margie Olson (1985). Other early texts showing such promise were Langefors (1974), Ein-Dor and Segev (1981), and Ahituv and Neumann (1990).

and second, because the results will be trivial. We all know the answer to that question already. Practitioners don't read academic journals (Rynes et al. 2002).

The Klein-Rowe Case for Professionally Qualified Doctoral Students (PQDSs)

All this being said, the argument that Klein and Rowe make for admitting PQDSs and training them such that they can identify important issues for practice and incorporate these issues into their research is a strong one, in our opinion. Whereas many North American-based doctoral programs prefer students with industry experience, this is not universally the case. So having a system that would result in more practical knowledge in our student base and at the same time warranting this through further PQDS education seems like an eminently sensible solution. Our objection to Klein and Rowe is directed at the underlying, unproven assumption that IS research is not relevant along either of the two dimensions adumbrated earlier.

Concluding Remarks

Our strongly held belief is that articles in *MISQ* and other top journals should certainly be relevant to practice by virtue of a more pragmatic thematic focus, and they can be judged by that criterion. But they should not attempt to speak directly to a practitioner audience.

The means by which this hard-won knowledge is transferred to practitioners is through indirection. Indirection comes through the many ways in which we popularize our scholarship for practitioner audiences such as

1. Academic-practitioner journals (e.g., *MISQ Executive*)¹⁰
2. Textbooks that reflect the best theoretical and practical thinking in the business disciplines
3. Higher education courses and degree programs
4. Continuing education programs
5. Short courses or seminars
6. Public speaking engagements by academics
7. Newspaper articles
8. Brochures that describe in lay terms the ongoing research of research centers

When we begin to recognize the importance of these alternative knowledge transfer vehicles and stop expecting miracles of our best scholarly journals, we will perhaps find out that the relevance versus rigor debate is no debate at all. We are very possibly relevant, or at least much more relevant than many suppose,¹¹ and this so-called relevancy problem may have long since been solved.

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¹⁰With regard to this means of popularization, Jeanne Ross, who is the current editor-in-chief of *MISQ Executive*, remarked at a doctoral consortium panel at ICIS 2007 that IS researchers have only rarely been able to spin a single research project into both scholarly and a practitioner-oriented pieces because the styles of presentation are so different, the scope that should be covered differs, as do the up-front research designs. Two reactions to this: First, IS researchers may be able to broaden their scope and thereby cover both the needs of practitioners for solutions and for theory. Styles can be adapted after the fact, so they should not pose an impossible hurdle. Second, one would hope that the best articles in *MISQ Executive* would reflect the best scholarly thinking to date although they may not be presenting this through a meticulous literature review. And it would be through this means that the scholarly ideas are transferred.

¹¹HR researchers have investigated alternative sources, resulting in a variety of interesting findings (see Cascio 2007). It is not clear that these findings will generalize to the IS field, however, and we need to create our own knowledge about how this transference takes place, if indeed it does.

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Standards for Reviewing

1. **Conceptual Significance:** The work represents an important contribution to knowledge. It extends or challenges IS theory, empirical literature, methods, IS professional issues, or IS body of knowledge. Ties to relevant literature are clear as is the thrust of the central argument. The work explicates underlying assumptions well and provides direction for extending or improving on the present work.
2. **Practical Significance:** The work contributes to our understanding of current technological and organizational problems or challenges faced by IS or other practitioners.
3. **Design and Execution:** Methods, subjects, logic, and techniques (where relevant) are well designed for the investigation of the questions posed. The work is well executed, including provision of pertinent evidence and interpretation of results. Where appropriate, operationalizations of theoretical constructs, validity, and the choice of statistical and/or mathematical analysis are well done. The work adheres to AIS and generally accepted codes of scientific ethics.
4. **Presentation:** The work adopts a professional style and tone and is concise. It is grammatically correct and clear in its use of figures and tables. The flow of ideas in the paper is logical and there is a clear tie between its use of prior literature and a clear link between the method it adopts and its conclusions. The work is presented at a level of sophistication and length appropriate to the readership of the journal.

Part II

In the space below, please provide the following feedback for the authors and editors. When you have finished, please go to <http://mc.manuscriptcentral.com/misq>. At this website, you will first be asked to make a recommendation about the disposition of the manuscript ranging from (1) "reject," (2) "reject but invite new submission" (i.e., very risk revisions), (3) "major revisions," (4) "minor revisions," (5) "accept conditionally" (i.e., very minor revisions), and (6) "accept." After that, you will be prompted to upload this entire evaluation form in MS Word. Please do not upload either a pdf or html file. The editors will need a Word file to be able to easily aggregate the review team reports.

Comments for the Authors and Editors (use as much space as you like for each evaluation question and be sure *not* to identify yourself in this space):

1. What is interesting about this paper?
2. As the authors continue to develop this paper for possible publication in *MISQ* or another journal, what are the two or three strengths/contributions that you would like to see them highlight?
3. What are the two or three key challenges/shortcomings that they must overcome as they develop this paper for possible publication in *MISQ* or in another top journal? Please provide suggestions for overcoming these shortcomings/challenges.
4. Please write any additional comments here.

Appendix B

Samples of Journals by Journal Types

Academic Journals

American Economic Review
Decision Science
European Journal of Information Systems
European Management Journal
IEEE Transactions on Engineering Management
Industrial Marketing Management
Information & Management
Information Society
Information Systems Research
Journal of the Association for Information Systems
Journal of Business Logistics
Journal of Economic Behavioral Organization
Journal of General Management
Journal of Global Information Management
Journal of Management
Journal of Management Information Systems
Journal of Strategic Information Systems
Long Range Planning
Management Decision
MIS Quarterly
Management Science
Managerial Audit Journal
Organization Science

Academic-Practitioner Journals

Academy of Management Executive
Business Quarterly
California Management Review
College & Research Libraries
Communications of the ACM
Harvard Business Review
Human Resource Planning
Journal of Euromarketing
Journal of Systems Management
MISQ Executive

Practitioner Journals

ABA Banking Journal
Bank Management
Best's Review (Life/Health)
CFO: The Magazine for Senior Financial Executives
CIO
Datamation
Forbes
Government Executive
Industry Week
Internal Auditor
International Business
InternetWeek
Management Accounting - London
McKinsey Quarterly
Purchasing & Supply Management
Supply Management
TMA Journal
Working Woman

