

Editor's Comments

Bridging Research and Practice

Few debates generate the depth of emotion within a business school's faculty as those that seek to define the proper role of business school research. The popular press has labeled such research as "fuzzy, irrelevant, pretentious."¹ Even a prominent business school dean, when asked to assess typical academic published papers, concluded that, "they say nothing in these articles and they say it in a pretentious way."² For many faculty and their schools, such attacks are exaggerated, unbalanced, and often untrue. But it is clear that business schools are under increasing pressure to develop what one panel of experts describes as a "...vision that seeks closer relationships between traditional research methodology and business practice."³ The business school is a professional school with obvious linkages to the business professions. Drawing a parallel to the business school, a colleague recently asked what we would think of "medical schools whose research did not address the treatment of disease."⁴ Too often business school research addresses problems of little relevance or, equally damaging, fails to be tested in the world of practice. Effective communications is another barrier to application. Another prominent study claims that "[t]he cause of the breakdown in the application of research findings often can be placed squarely on the shoulders of those producing the research. Faculty many times appear either unable or, as is more likely the case, unwilling to frame their findings in such a way as to highlight managerial applicability."⁵

Fortunately, business faculty are becoming increasingly responsive to these concerns. According to data gathered in that same study, "business schools have indeed 'heard' the criticism that a high proportion of business school research is too abstract and not, therefore, sufficiently applied."⁶ The challenge is to make our research more relevant and more applied "without any sacrifice of academic rigor in research. . . ."⁷

Research in information systems is not immune from criticism. A very well-known senior professor approached me after a recent academic conference and summarized his reactions to the papers he had seen presented: "It is like these researchers are sitting in the front yards of organizations peering in the windows with telescopes." Fortunately, however, the field of information systems, and the *MIS Quarterly* in particular, has a long and successful tradition of practitioners opening their doors to researchers.

In 1976, The Society for Management Information Systems⁸ and the University of Minnesota's Management Information Systems Research Center (MISRC) created a partnership around a shared vision. The vision was to become a very special journal—the *Management Information Systems Quarterly*. Today, on the *MIS Quarterly*'s fifteenth birthday, both the vision and that partnership seem remarkably prescient. In 1977, in his "Editorial Preview" to the first issue, founding Senior Editor Gary Dickson proposed the following objective for the new journal:

¹ Business Week, "Is Research in the Ivory Tower 'Fuzzy, Irrelevant, Pretentious'?" October 29, 1990, p. 62.

² Ibid., p. 62.

³ "Leadership for a Changing World," Report on the Commission on Admission to Graduate Management Education, Graduate Management Admission Council, 1990, p. 34.

⁴ Bettis, R.A. "Strategic Management and the Straightjacket: An Editorial Essay," *Organization Science* (2:3), August 1991, p. 317.

⁵ Porter, L.W. and McKibben, L.E. *Management Education and Development: Drift or Thrust into the 21st Century*, McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1988, p. 177 (commissioned by the American Association of Collegiate Schools of Business).

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ See footnote 3, p. 34.

⁸ Now called the Society for Information Management or SIM.

"Our major goals are to be managerially oriented and to offer something of benefit to the practitioner. At the same time, we intend to provide a vehicle for researchers working in the information systems field to communicate with each other and with practitioners."

In assuming my responsibilities as senior editor of the *MIS Quarterly*, I find that Gary Dickson's early goals have richly ripened with time. They capture the need for balance, communications, and cooperation that is required if we are to effectively bridge research and practice.

Although their needs and objectives differ, the *Quarterly's* two audiences remain tightly linked to a common goal: the successful management and application of information resources within organizations. Today, more than at any time in our past, there is an obvious opportunity and need for these two groups of highly talented professionals to tackle together the challenges facing the field. The *MIS Quarterly* provides a unique forum for such cooperation. Indeed, it is one of a very small number of top-ranked academic journals that seeks to appeal to an executive audience while maintaining a reputation for scholarly excellence.

There has always been a creative tension in balancing the varied needs of our executive and academic audiences. The job of the senior editor, as our publisher, Jim Wetherbe, described to me, is "to ensure that neither side ever overpowers the other." This is the challenge that makes this position so appealing. Our authors are typically skilled researchers. They are volunteers, but for many, a publication in the *MIS Quarterly* can contribute to promotions, tenure, and the respect of their colleagues. As long as our standards remain high they will continue to favor us with their best work.

But effectively bridging theory and practice requires that we recognize the needs of our executive as well as our academic subscribers and authors. The *MIS Quarterly* is unlikely to ever be accused of catering to our executive readership. Our articles are sometimes difficult to read, frequently long, and often assume prior knowledge of the topic. Many articles have a strong theoretical foundation, and they frequently describe research methodologies unfamiliar to management readers. But I believe we could be doing far more than we currently are to make our journal more appealing to our executive subscribers without sacrificing scholarship. Below I discuss each of the *MIS Quarterly's* three departments and examine the role each can play in fostering a constructive balance.

Issues and Opinions: This section, which is less formally reviewed than the remainder of the *MIS Quarterly*, raises issues of general interest to the field. Articles should appeal to a broad spectrum of our readers and, preferably, provoke comment, ferment debate, and stimulate professional introspection. Illustrations of the kinds of issues I would like to see us address include: The *Productivity Paradox*—When looked at as a whole, why don't investments in information technology seem to produce productivity gains? *Data Privacy*—As massive consumer purchase databases come online, how do we balance the need to protect individual privacy with the rich array of customized services that such information may make possible? *Outsourcing*—A near-term cost-cutting opportunity or long-run strategic neglect? *Information technology and work*—How might future systems impact working life, and how should society prepare for these changes? In general, we are less interested in the quality of the author's evidence than in the power of his or her ideas.

Theory and Research: In this section we publish articles primarily intended to extend the science of information management. With few exceptions such articles are theory-based or theory-generating. If these are empirical works, there will often be hypotheses with appropriate emphasis on research design, measurement issues, and statistical analysis; alternatively, these may be rich descriptive studies or research cases. For a field of scholarship to grow there must be freedom for researchers to talk to other researchers in the shorthand jargon of their research specialties. Researchers also require opportunities to address topics that, while important to the progress of scholarship, are not necessarily of general interest to large numbers of our readers. Others will focus on areas of research in which the potential application may be years away. Writing in 1977 Gary Dickson predicted, "... that the practitioner will find useful information in articles appearing in the Theory and Research Section." Experience has demonstrated, however, that though there is often information of interest to practitioners in our T&R papers, it may not be immediately obvious. Warren McFarlan, during his term as senior editor, initiated

our Executive Overviews to highlight the practical implications of these papers. We will extend that service by providing somewhat longer summaries that place these articles into a broader context.

The Theory and Research section is managed by our senior editor for theory and research, Michael Ginzberg, who serves with real distinction in this critical role. Mike has nearly complete autonomy in administering the T&R section. But Mike and I share a commitment to providing prospective authors with constructive reviews while publishing papers that exhibit the highest levels of scholarship.

Application: The title "application" is rather misleading. Over the years the Application section evolved from interviews with chief executive officers to articles that, at times, seemed similar to those published within the T&R section. Targeting quality scholarship was necessary and desirable as we successfully pursued academic credibility. But if the *MIS Quarterly* is to take advantage of its unique opportunity to bridge research and practice, we must master how to effectively communicate our work with an executive audience. I am not advocating lowering our standards. Rather, we must raise the hurdle of effective communications for application articles.

I believe that the following steps can assist in producing more readable and relevant articles without sacrificing scholarship. First, I am requesting that the members of our editorial board become proactive in identifying works that have the potential to interest a broader audience. Second, that senior and associate editors more frequently return papers to authors prior to formal review with suggestions aimed at better positioning those papers as application articles. Authors are thus provided with encouragement, valuable advice, and a quick turnaround, while we have an early opportunity to shape the paper for our audience. Third, that we retain our high research standards during the review process. But valid and important concerns of reviewers will not necessarily be reflected in the published paper if doing so adversely impacts the paper's communicating potential. In other words, authors will be required to demonstrate the quality of their findings to our reviewers, but the reader will be insulated from some of that evidence. Fourth, after acceptance, articles will be subjected to readability editing. Authors will be advised of the intended changes and given an opportunity to correct errors of interpretation. The *MIS Quarterly* will retain final editing rights for application pieces. Finally, to avoid unnecessary distractions within the text, we will increase our reliance on footnotes and appendices. This should improve readability, while retaining the trail of evidence that is central to scholarly inquiry.

For several reasons, these changes will evolve slowly: Many application papers are already under review. Our authors, associate editors, and reviewers must all become familiar with the changes. Susan Scanlan and Mark Saarinen, our excellent copy editors, will need to become familiar with, and carve out the time for, their expanded responsibilities. And, most importantly, we need to ensure that our constituencies are comfortable with this new direction. I therefore encourage and welcome communications regarding these changes.

We have made some initial changes with this issue. We recognize that your attention is one of our most valued resources and that we are competing for the limited time that you are willing to invest in knowledge acquisition. We want to make efficient use of that investment. For instance, we have added the paper titles to the front cover so that useful papers might quickly catch your eye. And the expanded Executive Overviews are now in a special section at the front of the journal. These summaries are not designed to lure you into reading the article but to highlight contents and findings of potential relevance to a busy executive. They are printed on a different color paper, so you can locate them quickly. The pages are perforated. Tear them out and route them among your colleagues, students, and others who are not yet *Quarterly* subscribers. We have also put the journal's date on the spine so you can retrieve a journal from a bookcase in a more familiar manner. We may even succeed in getting the journal to you in the month that appears on the spine.

Time management is an important factor in getting knowledge into print. Prospective authors look kindly on journals that manage this process well. Readers ultimately benefit from the increased number of quality submissions and the timely presentation of results. Over the last 18 months the *Quarterly* has made splendid progress in reducing the turnaround time for processing submissions. The editorial staff is committed to further improvements and to identifying and escalating problem articles before they turn into the "nightmares" that can rattle around the reviewing system for years. If you wake up in an *MIS*

Quarterly nightmare, call Mark or Susan at our offices in Minnesota. If they can't solve your problem soon, call me.

These changes might suggest that I opened the *MIS Quarterly's* closet and found it to be in need of spring cleaning. Nothing could be further from the truth! Through his inspired leadership, Jim Emery has passed on a journal that is strong, well-respected, and in excellent shape. It would be easy, even tempting, to assume a role of steward and guardian. But, because of its heritage, the *MIS Quarterly* is uniquely positioned to serve as an exemplary bridge between scholarship and practice. We have an opportunity and a responsibility to continue to build that bridge while aggressively safeguarding the strong research foundations that are already in place.

Finally, it is my pleasure to welcome to our editorial board Chris Kemerer and Tom Davenport. Chris is an associate professor at MIT, while Tom is a partner and director of research for Ernst & Young's Center for Information Technology and Strategy. I am also delighted to announce that Jane Fedorowicz, of Boston University, has accepted reappointment to our editorial board. It has been a tradition at the *MIS Quarterly* to rotate members off our board when their term expires. But, in very special cases such as this, we will make exceptions. Jane has demonstrated outstanding commitment to the advancement of the *MIS Quarterly* and is one of our most talented associate editors. Her reward for all that hard work is more hard work. Welcome back, Jane!

—Blake Ives