Editor's Comments

What Can the *MIS Quarterly* Do for Practitioners?

The *MIS Quarterly* is somewhat unusual among respected professional journals in that it explicitly aims to serve a dual constituency—academics and practitioners. There is not much question that *MISQ* has been very successful in meeting the needs of the academic community. The *Quarterly* is the publication of choice for many MIS faculty members, and in various ratings of journals, the *Quarterly* always shows up as one or the most valued and prestigious publications in the field.

It is not too difficult to understand why academics are so well served by the *Quarterly*. They have a strong motivation to engage in research and to publish the results of their work. Papers in the *Quarterly* are widely read and cited within the academic community, making it an excellent vehicle to reach one's peers in the discipline. A faculty member's standing in the profession, as well as prospects for promotion and tenure, depend heavily on his or her publication record. In assessing an academic publication, not all journals are treated as equals; a paper in a leading journal certainly counts more heavily than one in a lesser publication. The *MIS Quarterly* generally enjoys an excellent reputation among members of academic personnel committees who pass on promotions and tenure decisions. We can be very selective in the papers we publish—we publish only 5 to 10 percent of the papers submitted—making it possible to maintain a high level of quality.

A professional journal serves not only as a vehicle for publishing, but also as an important source of information for a faculty member. Most of them—particularly the more junior ones—tend to rely heavily on the literature to keep up with their field (while senior faculty members more often use personal networks for this purpose). Academics are motivated to spend the considerable time necessary to keep up with the literature, providing as it does one of the most vital raw materials for their professional work.

The value of the *Quarterly* is not so clear in the case of the practitioner. Surveys indicate that practitioners tend to get much of their information on a person-to-person basis—from their staff and colleagues, peers in other organizations, informal discussions at conferences, vendor representatives, and the like. Many practitioners devote much of their limited reading time to general business publications and feel they do not have much time left over to keep up with more specialized professional journals. Quite aside from their lack of time, practitioners often view the papers in *MISQ* and other research-oriented journals as too theoretical and abstract, not relevant for solving their pressing problems.

Unlike academics, practitioners do not view a journal as a principal outlet for their professional work. They are rewarded for results achieved within their organizations, not for their contributions to the profession as a whole. The more dramatic the internal success of an IS application, the more reluctant an organization is to tell the world about it. Although practitioners play a valuable role in editorial and review processes for the *MIS Quarterly*, they author a fairly small fraction of our published papers. Many successful practitioners view themselves primarily as general managers rather than IS specialists, and so have relatively little motivation to contribute to an MIS journal.

As senior editor, I have tried to address the question of how the *Quarterly* can be made more useful and relevant to the practitioner. The issue is a delicate one, because any step that would reduce the attractiveness and credibility of the journal within the academic community would be entirely self defeating. There are, however, things we can do that enhance the value of the journal for both its constituencies.

This issue of the *Quarterly*, for example, is devoted to case studies submitted for the annual paper award competition sponsored by the Society for Information Management. This competition has been quite successful in eliciting valuable case material that has otherwise been difficult to get published. Although it may not have quite reached the heights of the Baldridge competition, the SIM award has generated considerable attention within the practitioner community. Interestingly enough, all but one of the papers published in this issue were written collaboratively by practitioner and academics, which serves as a useful model for making good material available in the literature.

There are other things that we can do to increase the relevance and usefulness of *MISQ*. It is appropriate, I think, to publish thoughtful papers that do not necessarily fit the standard mold for a research paper. The September 1989 paper by Dixon and John, "The 1990's Technology Issues Facing Corporate Management," comes to mind as an example of a useful contribution that probably does not satisfy the standard criteria for research. We are looking at other papers that have a special claim for publication even though they do not fit the normal research paradigm.

Considerable attention has been given to the need to increase the relevance of academic research. A recent *Business Week* article, for example, makes the point that incentives within business schools bias research in the direction of esoteric theory having no obvious relevance. This opinion is shared, at least in part, within the academy, but it needs careful qualification. The key question is, what is meant by "relevance."

If a practitioner is looking for ideas to solve a very specific problem, then the literature—certainly not the *MIS Quarterly*—is not likely to provide much help. We can, however, provide theory and insightful case histories from which a thoughtful practitioner can benefit greatly. I would argue that every paper in this issue has potential value to practitioners (as well, I would hope, for academics). Although few readers are likely to be in the business of, for example, developing an online cotton trading system (discussed in the first paper on the TELCOT system), a number of important generalizations can be gleaned from the reported experience. Similarly, the final paper on an executive information system in a public sector organization provides useful lessons that are applicable for private sector firms as well.

The ability of a practitioner to benefit from the literature depends in part on his or her talents in discovering generalized concepts from specific case histories that rarely match the details of one's own situation. It is common for organizations to view their circumstances as unique, requiring a unique approach. Each organization does indeed face unique problems in the specifics, but I am often struck by just how common most issues are in our field. Generalization calls for skill in abstracting out of the essence of a situation, rather than focusing on specific characteristics. Academics are presumably in the business of generalizing from empirical evidence, and practitioners need to cultivate this ability as well.

A final comment on relevance might be in order. The literature is much better at providing concepts appropriate for longer-term matters than it is in giving short-term solutions. Too many organizations are so immersed in short-term problems that they do not give sufficient attention to more fundamental issues. It is frustrating to see how long it takes general practice to match theory or leading-edge practice. I would venture to say that almost all short-term problems faced today by organizations were anticipated in the literature a number of years ago. A better understanding of the literature could have avoided some of the current difficulties. Editors and authors have a responsibility to make it easier for practitioners to assimilate the results of research and state-of-the-art practice, but practitioners must also bear part of the burden of translating theory into practice.

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With this issue we welcome the addition of an outstanding group of new associate editors: Gordon Davis, David Goldstein, Enid Mumford, Judith Olson, K.S. Raman, and William Remus. We are also losing the services of four AEs: Maryam Alavi, Jeffrey Hoffer, Lynne Markus, and Jon Turner. I greatly appreciate their dedicated service in an essential role.

James C. Emery