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Building a Highway Where Research Shapes and is Shaped by Practice

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Editor's Comments

Building a Highway Where Research Shapes and is Shaped by Practice

The IS academic field tries to be two things at once: rigorous in methodology and theory building *and* relevant and useful for practitioners. This is not an easy feat, though one often lamented and debated.[1] In this context, the study of IT in practice is more than a desirable byproduct of IS research. It is its foundation and raison d'être. In fact, a cynic would say that IS theory only exists because practice exists and therefore, studying practice must take precedence.

But the road connecting IS practice and research seems, at times, to be more a hiking trail than a superhighway, one with little traffic heading in either direction. It is this failing that drives *MIS Quarterly Executives'* new motto: "Where Research Shapes and is Shaped by Practice." A major obstacle to transforming a dusty path into a busy highway though is the inability of many IS scholars to establish the first steps in collaborating with practice and building an ongoing relationship with practitioners. In what follows—and with help from some IS scholars who have overcome that obstacle—I offer some thoughts on how to forge mutually beneficial research collaborations between IS scholars and practitioners.

To guide me, I sought the assistance of a handful of IS scholars that I refer to as "conversation partners" in the following. While I do not cite those individuals verbatim in-text, rest assured, their thoughts are represented. My conversation partners included (in alphabetical order): Brian Donnellan, Stuart Madnick, Lars Mathiassen, Martin Mocker, and Jan vom Brocke. Here is what I found:

1 See for example: 1) Davenport, T. H., Markus, M. L. "Rigor vs. Relevance Revisited: Response to Benbasat and Zmud," *MIS Quarterly* (23:1), 1999, pp. 19-23; 2) Lee, A. S. "Rigor and Relevance in MIS Research: Beyond the Approach of Positivism Alone." MIS Quarterly, 1999, pp. 29-33; and 3) Rosemann, M., Vessey, I. "Toward Improving the Relevance of Information Systems Research to Practice: The role of Applicability Checks," *MIS Quarterly* (32:1), 2008, pp. 1-22.

#1 Have a genuine curiosity in how organizations solve their problems with technology

While a healthy dose of "genuine curiosity" is paramount for conducting practice-oriented research, not every IS scholar is comfortable with the messiness and the noise of an organizational setting. Those who embrace it, however, are well suited to work with practice and contribute to *MIS Quarterly Executive*.

My conversation partners emphasized that this curiosity must come from the heart. A researcher must *feel and believe* that she can learn something when engaging with practice. In fact, viewing the world as a laboratory seems essential.

Also, scholars with a genuine curiosity have a constant ear on the ground. They chat with practitioners at every opportunity they can. If they hear a good story or an intriguing problem set, they follow up with questions. They are sparked like a journalist looking for a scoop.

These scholars also understand that not every conversation will lead to a research project. Kissing many frogs (or practitioners) seems key. Checking what is on practitioners' minds in regular intervals, even testing hypotheses as part of these conversations, and showing empathy towards practitioners and their problem sets is deemed vital. Equally crucial, as my conversation partners pointed out, is to avoid coming across as having all the answers.

These scholars also often build relationships outside of a specific research project. For example, they join professional societies, such as the *Society for Information Management*, attend conferences frequented by practitioners, or get involved in executive education programs. Overall, they try to maximize the chances of finding the scoop and staying informed about industry trends at the same time.

However serendipitous those brief initial encounters and conversations might be, they help determine if there is a shared curiosity in learning and discovering things together—an important starting point for any collaboration moving forward. And as one of my conversation partners vividly reminded me, data collection starts from that very first moment—and not a moment later.

#2 Get as high in the organizational ladder as you can or need to

Once a collaboration partner and an intriguing problem set is identified, expanding the reach and getting to know others in the company is an advisable next step. Doing so shelters a researcher from organizational changes that may take place and ensures some sort of control, should the collaboration partner go missing-in-action.

Brokering relationships with higher ups in the organization is a must. As noted by my conversation partners, higher-ranking practitioners are often more open to sharing relevant insights, which is essential for any type of research, practice-oriented or otherwise. They will better understand the organizations strategy and how IT aligns with it. Their political clout also reduces red tape, which is important for the approval stage of the research project; it also provides easier access to others across the organization.

My conversation partners also pointed out that for those senior level executives, it is important *not* to use a standardized interview guide for a variety of reasons: a researcher might miss out on a good story, or a subtle but important observation; it might show the researcher off as less empathetic and understanding, and thus diminishing the chances of establishing an ongoing relationship. Structured interviews, in contrast, are most beneficial for mid-level contacts where the sheer volume of interviews can uncover specific details, along with themes and trends.

At all costs, researchers should avoid working exclusively with practitioners from the communications department—unless, of course, their research focus is on marketing information systems. In tendency, marketing practitioners want something to be written as a success story, which IS research is not. They are also often concerned about competitors gaining unwanted insights. References to seeking involvement or approval from the marketing/communications or legal department might also make one more cautious about the openness of the responses.

#3 Lay a solid foundation for an explicit two-way street

A classic win-win situation should always be the ultimate goal of every research project. The partnering company benefits by gaining insights, solving problems, or generating new ideas, while the researcher gains knowledge and material to write about. Understanding the strategic goals of both sides and being creative in defining deliverables and a plan forward are therefore paramount. Though this boundary-finding process can be messy, it is time well spent.

Many issues can arise during this time. It may become apparent that the partnering company lacks a clear understanding of what a researcher can and cannot do. It might also come to light that the project's time pressure is simply too excessive; or that the project is being misused as free labor for tasks that otherwise would cost thousands. These red flags need to be sorted out earlier rather than later, including the possibility to walk away.

Researchers also might want to think about setting up a project's own organization, particularly when multiple researchers (including PhD students) are involved. It is advisable to agree on a rhythm for updates like monthly meetings. Here, times zones and travel arrangements might distort this rhythm.

Apart from non-disclosure agreements that need to be signed in the early stages, it is also the point in time to reiterate that nothing will be published without individuals' approval for their respective quotes and without the partnering company's overall approval and review of the manuscript.

#4 Be careful with early deliverables

Deliverables depend, of course, on the type of research project chosen. When conducting a retrospective study, for example, a researcher might first write a case vignette and share it with the partnering company. Such a deliverable has the effect that the partnering company learns how, and about what, a researcher writes. As part of the write-up, they also might learn something about the literature as it relates to their situation. Overall, they learn to trust and gauge the value that can come from the research project.

In contrast, when conducting a design study, a first and quick deliverable often involves organizing a workshop. Putting an agenda together that is of interest for the partnering company, by using a scenario approach for example, is advisable. During the workshop, researchers can showcase their expertise and get to know the team personally. Workshops not only help to establish a common ground for further deliverables early in the project but are often welcomed by the partnering company as a valuable (and free) learning opportunity.

For researchers planning on conducting an interventionist study, the first step is to delve deeply into the problem set that the partnering company is facing, and developing a solid understanding early on and quickly. A lot of time will also be spent on selling the partnering company on the rationale of why, and the value received from, conducting an intervention. This demands detailed planning of resources and commitments.

But irrespective of the type of research chosen, my conversation partners reminded me that the first two to three months are crucial for building a shared experience and laying a solid foundation for carrying things forward. If taken too lightly, they will cause the project to fail for both sides.

#5 Embrace learning as the goal

Once the researcher and partnering company have found their rhythm, timeframes often relax, and updates often stretch to longer intervals. Delivering intermediate results takes focus now, which coincidentally also fits well with the way IS research is typically done—it becomes more agile and more of a continuous dialogue between entities.

It is also the time to think about writing. An *MIS Quarterly Executive* article should be viewed as a deliverable that satisfies both sides, the practitioner as well as academic side. Admittedly, learning to write for *MIS Quarterly Executive* versus *MIS Quarterly*, for example, and using the same research project as the basis, requires a unique skill set. It requires not only the ability to understand how practice-oriented differ from theoretical contributions, but first and foremost how to package those contributions and write them up for their respective outlets.

As my conversation partners noted, it often took them years to learn this skill set and to maneuver back and forth into theory. All of them confirmed that they have both processes—the practice-oriented and the theoretical one—in mind from the very beginning of each research project. Learning how both processes support each other, they say, is a skill set that will never go out of vogue for IS researchers. Likewise, learning how to write for journals that target practitioners is equally important and something the editorial team of *MIS Quarterly Executive* can help with!

During this intermediate phase, inviting collaboration partners into the classroom to report about the outcomes of the research project is an often-cited example and symptomatic of a successful and ongoing collaboration. Interestingly, and as attested to by my conversation partners, practitioners like to be challenged by students; they also like to present their experiences externally, which not only provides them with external but also with internal visibility.

But all of this is just a start. It is by no means an exhaustive list of best practices, but one that I hope offers both encouragement and guidance to those with that genuine curiosity about practice-oriented research, helping us to continue building a highway "where research shapes and is shaped by practice."

MIS Quarterly Executive Announcements

With the advent of new technologies, including generative AI, organizations find themselves at a pivotal juncture, tasked with the challenge of anticipating and adapting to the future. How can organizations identify and develop new work forms? And how can they adeptly navigate societal shifts in a world that is yet to be defined?

If you are researching those and related topics, consider submitting to the MISQE/SIM Pre-ICIS 2024 Workshop on "Brave New Work: The Future of Work, Tasks and Jobs," chaired by Fred Niederman, Damien Joseph and Hope Koch. Workshop submissions are due Sep 1st, 2024; submissions to the Special Issue are due on March 1st, 2025.

In this Issue

The June issue spans a broad variety of topics, including avoiding project failures, developing a digital workforce, utilizing low-code-no-code approaches, scaling AI and instilling AI ethics into Robotic Process Automation. It has five research articles, an MISQE Insight piece, and a report conducted by SIM members.

In the first article "The Hidden Causes of Digital Investment Failures," Joe Peppard and R. M. Bastien unearths that the root causes for failed or challenged projects are often subtle, hidden and surprising—and unexpectedly defiant of the plethora of guidelines that research has produced. Utilizing hundreds of projects, they identify their characteristics, their implications and strategies to address them.

The second article, titled "Applying the Rite of Passage Approach to Ensure a Successful Digital Business Transformation" is inspired by the quest on how an organization can transform its human resources from legacy talent to a future-ready, digitally-empowered workforce. Nkosi Leary, Lorry Perkins, Umang Thakkar and Gregory Gimpel describe how the CEO of a staffing company successfully led his employees through significant technology-driven organizational changes by framing the transformation as an employee rite of passage.

In the third article, titled "Strategies for Managing Citizen Developers and No-Code Tools" and written by Olga Biedova, Blake Ives, David Male and Michael Moore, the authors examine the strengths, risks, and management strategies of no-code tools and citizen developers as part of four organizational case studies and provide recommendations for IT leaders to leverage these tools for organizational agility.

In the fourth article, titled "How Audi Scales Artificial Intelligence in Manufacturing," André Sagodi, Benjamin van Giffen, Johannes Schiertshauer, Klemens Niehues and Jan vom Brocke scrutinize Audi's AI-based quality inspection system, consisting of three innovations stages. They offer recommendations for digital leaders to scale AI effectively and to harness its full potential.

In the fifth article, titled "Translating AI Ethics Principles into Practice to Support Robotic Process Automation Implementation," Dörte Schulte-Derne and Ulrich Gnewuch conduct a longitudinal case study of robotic process automation with an energy service provider. They highlight that digital leaders need to take employees' needs and concerns seriously, even before the first process is automated using AI.

Our MISQE Insight piece is written by John Sviokla and titled "MISQE Insight on Leveraging Computability for Competitive Advantage." Admittedly, the term "computability" brings back vague memories of long and winding theoretical computer science classes, involving concepts of the lambda calculus and np-complete problems. Sviokla uses it instead as powerful lens to explain how leaders can create value.

Our last piece, a SIM piece and written by Degan Kettles, Daniel Mazzola and Benjamin Richardson, is on "The Path to Becoming a Fortune 500 CIO." The authors examined the careers of 400 Fortune 500 CIOs, using data from LinkedIn profiles, along with interview data from six Fortune 500 CIOs who are active members of the Society for Information Management.

Enjoy reading and sharing those articles!
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Editor-in-Chief