IS Research's Blind Spot: Are SMOs the Overlooked 98% of Organisations?

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Small and medium organisations (SMOs, comprising businesses as well as non-profit organisations) are among the most numerous organisations in almost every country. Small and medium businesses usually also contribute substantially to a country's GDP and its growth. Welsh and White (1982) note that "a small business is not a little big business", i.e. that small and medium businesses – and by extension all but the largest non-profit organisations as well – are of a fundamentally different nature compared to larger organisations.

SMOs usually have scarce IT management resources and capabilities, may rely on 'virtual CIOs' or internal 'involuntary IT managers', and may not even have a single employee with a profound understanding of IT's strategic business potential and the related risks for their organization. Over time, such organisations may be left behind on the wrong side of the digital divide (i.e. failing to adapt their business for the digital age). Yet, there is little IS research that addresses these issues. Instead, IS research tends to focus on larger organisations who have ample resources so that they can sustain an IT or digital function and can therefore at least potentially 'help (and transform) themselves' in order to stay competitive in the digital age.

Moreover, such a research emphasis on larger organisations means that many of our theories and implications in IS research may not necessarily be applicable to SMOs in the first place. For instance, IT strategy or digital innovation research commonly assumes that a role similar to a Chief Information Officer or Chief Digital Officer exists. Neither is true for many SMOs.

Against this backdrop, this TREO talk posits that IS research has two serious 'blind spots' with respect to SMOs: First, the most common type of organization in many countries is understudied in IS research. Second, the most common type of organization in many countries also lies outside the boundary conditions of many IS research outcomes. Moreover, this focus on larger organisations is usually taken for granted and not even explicitly acknowledged.

A shift in research emphasis towards SMOs may therefore start by questioning our disciplinary knowledge bases with respect to the knowledge's applicability to SMOs. Moreover, such a shift would increasingly produce research results for organisations that would at least equally benefit from additional IT and digital-related insights and practical implications, if not even more so. In addition, IS research would then benefit organisations that often do not have the resources to question or change their 'digital status quo' on their own.

References

Welsh, J. A., and White, J. F. 1982. "A Small Business Is Not a Little Big Business," *Harvard Business Review* (59:4), pp. 18–33.