The Relevancy of Information Systems Research: The Practitioner’s View

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ABSTRACT

Recently, the subject of research relevancy has received a great deal of attention in the IS academic press. Several leading academic journals, such as MIS Quarterly, Information Systems Research, and Information Resources Management Journal have devoted special issues and/or articles to this topic. Typically, these articles have been opinion pieces from leading IS academics (i.e., Benbasat, Zmud, Robey, Lee, etc.) and have not included significant input from practitioners within the IS area. This chapter tries to capture the IS practitioners’ perspective on research relevance through a survey sent to 400 IS practitioners. The results indicate that IS practitioners (1) do not know where academic research is published; (2) find academic research dated; (3) find academic research difficult to read; and/or (4) find the recommendations included in academic research to be of little value.

Keywords: information systems; relevancy; research; survey

INTRODUCTION

As much as 80% of management research may be irrelevant. (Business Week, 1990, p. 62). Scott Cowen, former Dean, Weatherhead School of Management, Case Western Reserve University

Business academics say nothing in these articles and they say it in a pretentious way. (Business Week, 1990, p. 62). Richard West, former Dean, Leonard N. Stern School of Business, New York University

If these quotes reflect the judgment of former heads (deans) of respected schools of business, how must practitioners feel? Academics publish their research findings in journals they deem to be of high standing, rigorous, and with exemplary reputation. However, many academics complain that practitioners do not read, appreciate, or understand their publications. While this may be accepted as an unfortunate outcome of research that upholds rigorous standards, has anyone actually measured...
the depth of practitioners’ readings of these academic journals, their contents, and the level of understanding if they are actually read? This research is an attempt to determine if academic research is relevant (or read, understood, etc.) to IS practitioners.

We in academia try to write scholarly articles that will stimulate thinking, lead to new and interesting research, provide guidance to practitioners, and generally push at the boundaries of knowledge. These are the time-honored goals for academic research and its related publications. Recently, however, there has been considerable debate within the academic community about whether we are accomplishing these goals and to what extent. Indicators of accomplishment would start most likely with the targeted people reading and understanding our research/publications. The expected readers would/should include academics, academic trainees (doctoral students), and field practitioners.

Recent articles in various journals and café conversations among academics have questioned whether academic research is being read by the largest of these groups or practitioners. This is especially true in the rapidly evolving field of Information Systems (IS)/Information Technology (IT). These published and verbal debates about the relevancy of our research to the IS/IT practitioner have largely followed the path of opinions, studied opinions, and/or the expert opinion of the publishing writer. In this study, we first attempt to validate, or invalidate, the opinion that practitioners do not read academically generated research; and secondly, to determine if their lack of reading is because they feel these articles are irrelevant to them and their work. This discussion has caused us to go to the source. We asked the IS/IT practitioners themselves (high-level managers, mid-level managers, and IS/IT professionals) if, in fact, they find academic research relevant to them and their work.

This chapter is organized as follows. First, we briefly review selected works on IS relevancy. Second, we describe the method of data collection. Third, we present the results of the study; and finally, we discuss the implications of these findings to the IS academic community.

LITERATURE ON RESEARCH RELEVANCE

To establish an understanding of how practitioners currently evaluate academically generated IS research, two questions emerge and need to be addressed. First, is academically generated research read by practitioners? Second, what evidence does literature provide whether practitioners find, or do not find, academically produced research relevant to their professional work?

A perusal through the IS/IT literature finds arguments concerning the very meaning of relevancy. Benbasat and Zmud (1999) discuss relevancy in the context of an academic research article. They suggest that it all starts with the article being read; and if an article is not read, it cannot be relevant, regardless of its content. In short, readability can be determined or conditioned by the article’s style and tone. Benbasat and Zmud (1999) also imply that an article’s relevancy can be measured by its implementability, or its ability to synthesize a body of knowledge, and/or by its ability to stimulate critical thinking. They suggest that other factors limiting the relevance of IS/IT academic articles include (1) a lack of cumulative tradition within the IS/IT area, (2) the dynamic nature of the field, and (3) a limited exposure of academicians to the business world.

Robey and Markus (1998) reviewed the widely accepted inverse relationship
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