

## Foreword

The oft-quoted dictum of Kurt Lewin in 1945 that “nothing is so practical as a good theory” remains relevant today. A good theory is practical because it helps us to systemize knowledge in ways that are fruitful for both research and professional practice. In research a good theory assists with the cumulative building of knowledge, as it shows areas in which there is some consensus on what is known or agreed and also points to directions where further work is required. Expressing theory explicitly also provides opportunities for researchers to test the theory and make further advances. Good theory also systemizes knowledge in ways that make it easier to disseminate that knowledge and have it widely understood so that it can be used to inform or be acted upon in practice. Further, a good theory has some credibility: it has stood the test of time to some degree and has been assessed against empirical evidence so that we are willing to trust its applicability.

To illustrate what we can hope for in a good theory in the social sciences we can look at the example of the theory of the *Diffusion of Innovations*, originally developed by Everett Rogers in his book released in 1962. Rogers based his theory on his own work studying the adoption decisions of farmers and also on a review of many other studies of innovations of different types in many different contexts. Thus, the theory drew on a strong empirical base, which added to its credibility. The theory has lessons for practice in that it provides advice that can be acted upon by change agents wishing to introduce innovations. A sign that Rogers’ theory has been influential is that his work is one of the most highly cited books in the social sciences.

Despite such good examples there remains some lack of understanding of what is meant by theory and how we should theorize. In management there has been debate for a period of time, with issues in the *Academy of Management Review* (1989, Vol. 14, No. 4) and the *Administrative Science Quarterly* (1995, Vol. 40, No. 3) devoted to problems with theorizing. In the social sciences there is also an acknowledgement that consensus on theoretical positions might be more difficult to obtain than in the natural sciences (see Glick et al., 2007).

The field of information systems has problems of its own in relation to theory. The fields of study relating to information technology are relatively new and there is not a long tradition to draw on to explain what is meant by theory and theorizing. As information systems is also inherently an interdisciplinary field, concerned with both the study of technology and the study of human behavior, there are problems in that there are a number of competing traditions jostling for our attention. In information systems we have scholars with backgrounds in diverse fields, from mathematics to management and the natural sciences, all of whom have grown up with their own particular perspectives on the knowledge creation process and theorizing. In my own work I have endeavored to reconcile some of these different views by pointing out that we can have different types of theory, depending on our goals: whether to analyse, explain, predict or to guide design and action (Gregor, 2006).

Further, possibly because of the newness of the field of information systems, we are still finding our way with the development of strong mature theory that is distinct from other disciplines. Weber (2003) makes a good argument for our “own” theory that will characterize our field. Regrettably, it appears that we are still struggling to identify these strong theories that are unique to information systems.

Given this background the publication of the present volume is more than timely, as it addresses a number of difficult but important issues. Foundational work is included that addresses issues such as the nomological network for information systems theory, the use of structuration theory to cope with different levels of analysis and the grounded theory approach. Other chapters show how theory can be developed for a number of our important problem areas in information systems.

The authors and editors of the book are to be commended in undertaking this initiative and giving greater prominence to the valuable work that is being done to advance the state of information systems theory.

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