International Business and Global Information Management Research: Toward a Cumulative Tradition

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This work reviews the relationship between the disciplines of international business and global information management (GIM), examining how international business has served as a reference discipline for GIM and how GIM has contributed to the development of international business. GIM contributions are considered in terms of their findings as well as topic and approach. Based on a review of all Journal of Global Information Management (JGIM) articles since the inception of the journal, this paper identifies international business scholars that have been important to the field of GIM and some who might deserve more attention.

INTRODUCTION

The Journal of Global Information Management (JGIM) was launched in 1993 initiating the first refereed publication aimed solely at global information management (GIM). Although many important and valuable research studies pertaining to GIM had been published in leading management information systems (MIS) journals prior to that time, bringing together and focusing attention on GIM, JGIM presented a unique opportunity to begin a cumulative research tradition as well as to have an impact on understandings and practices in the area.

This tenth anniversary issue of JGIM presents an opportunity for reflection on the current state of GIM as a research domain. It also represents a time to consider the contributions of JGIM in this area. This paper aims to contribute to these reflections. It is intended to evaluate the development of a cumulative body of research. By this we mean the accumulation of data, knowledge, approaches, and findings across a set of issues covering the strikingly large array of variables relevant to GIM. Toward this end we will consider the relationship between international business theory and GIM where both are concerned with the development, use, and outcomes of information and information technology (IT) in global commerce.

The editors of JGIM took an ambitious stance in 1993 by starting the first issue with an elemental framework connecting international business research and GIM. Deans and Ricks (1993), among other things, undertook to explain the linkage between information systems and international business. It was clear at that time and continues to be clear that there are linkages and interactions between MIS and international business. Information technologies enable many aspects of international commerce ranging from the nearly instantaneous transfer of billions of dollars of capital between institutions to outsourcing of software development from one firm to another anywhere in the world. It is equally clear that the growth of global trade has fueled markets for IT and stimulated the diffusion of information technologies and technology management around the globe. Deans and Ricks (1993) advocated for the use of international business as a reference discipline for GIM to provide a beginning platform for the examination of these and related aspects of the interaction of IT and global commerce.

The first goal of this paper is to examine the content of the articles published in JGIM by looking for patterns among the findings that show the development (or lack of development) of a cumulative research tradition in the field. The second goal is to consider the degree to which researchers publishing in JGIM have actually used international business as a reference discipline. The third goal of this paper is to consider the structure of GIM research in terms of research methods and unit of analysis. These are also important aspects of a research paradigm and may lead to insights about the current state of the field. Finally, the fourth goal is to draw
some conclusions regarding the state of GIM research and propose some directions for future activity. It should be further noted that, in an attempt to maintain a manageable boundary on what could be an essentially boundless research project, this discussion primarily targets articles that have appeared in JGIM in accord with the theme of the 10th anniversary issue. At the time of preparation of this article, the last available JGIM issue was volume 8, number 2.

BACKGROUND

What Is a Cumulative Tradition?

By focusing research efforts on a limited set of questions, fuller answers can be accumulated across more theories, variables, and research settings than any individual study can address. The value for researchers in this approach is a higher degree of confidence that results will add to a growing understanding of important issues. The value for practitioners is increased confidence in applying lessons to their own particular situations. Developing a cumulative tradition for a field, however, relies on researchers to settle on (1) a set of questions the increased understanding of which represents significant contributions or (2) an evolving framework where individual studies can be categorized and viewed in relation to one another.

Early efforts in the field of MIS led to a number of frameworks for investigating the field, some of which were widely referenced, particularly in early studies. However, the vast array of technologies and settings in which they are implemented led to diverse published research that are sometimes difficult to see as addressing the same topic. At the same time, a variety of efforts, notably Zmud’s (2000) recent collection of essays regarding MIS research streams and Dickson and DeSanctis’ (2000) essays regarding the current state of MIS research are beginning to reshape our thinking regarding the overall structure of MIS research.

What Is GIM?

GIM is viewed as the expansion of MIS into the global setting. Over the years, the research domain of MIS has generated an array of findings on topics ranging from methods for producing IT to the integration of IT into the firm’s strategic mission. Little of this research has explicitly targeted firms utilizing information and IT across national boundaries or extended findings beyond the domestic location (most frequently the US) where the data are collected and observations drawn. GIM is differentiated from MIS by its specifically including one or more of these multi-national perspectives. Additionally, this view proposes that some issues related to IT only emerge in the global setting. Issues such as the transnational flow of data and development teams creating products for use in multiple national settings would be examples. Although Deans and Ricks (1993) do not include domestic-only studies within the purview of GIM, a number of studies published in JGIM have focused on domestic MIS conditions with an implicit comparison to the USA or “developed countries”. Considering how such papers expand the multinational range of MIS knowledge, it would seem logical to include them as contributions to the GIM field.

What Is a Reference Discipline?

A new domain of inquiry has a tendency to raise itself by the bootstraps, inventing new terminology and raising new questions in light of a growing body of experience. However, there are opportunities to borrow ideas, theories, approaches, and questions from fields that overlap in content area or share some but not all elements of interest. Cognitive psychology, communications, and sociology have clearly served as sources for MIS research. For example, cognitive psychology has created some initial basis for investigation of the use of information in decision-making and human information processing. Communications and sociology contributed greatly to the study of the diffusion of technology and group support systems. In fact, in these areas’ findings in MIS have stimulated the reexamination and extension of original conclusions in the underlying discipline.

GIM certainly draws upon MIS as a reference discipline. Many MIS scholars are drawn upon for specific references and some frequently studied MIS questions are reapplied in a multinational setting, Rose and Straub’s (1998) examination of the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) of computer use being a prime example.

Why Might International Business Serve as a Reference Discipline for GIM?

It is also logical for GIM to build from the theory and empirical observations of international business researchers. This is for two reasons. First, international business provides a set of broad questions within which IT may contribute to answers. Why does a multinational firm invest in one country rather than another? GIM adds consideration of the nature of IT and its use within multinational firms as well as the policies and infrastructures of the nations or regions available for investment. Second, international business provides a wealth of environmental and organizational level variables (and measures of these) that must be evaluated to understand fully the role of IT. A significant body of international business literature, as summarized by Deans and Ricks (1993) considers relationships among variables such as strategy for managing foreign operations, level of international involvement, number of foreign subsidiaries, location of foreign subsidiaries, international experience, company size, industry, business strategy, and international organization structure. Each of these can potentially influence best practices and outcomes when utilizing IT across global entities.