Are We Still Talking to Ourselves? An Analysis of the Introspective Information Technology Field by Brazilian Experts

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ABSTRACT

Academic productivity standards in the field of information technology (IT) seem to address only in part the interests of practice – what is best known as the conflict between rigor and relevance in research. Based on assumptions about the interest, the currency, the accessibility and the applicability of academic production, the authors collected the perception of 11 researchers and 11 managers highly representative of the IT field in Brazil. Brazil was the site of research given its boosting economy and solid IT industry. Results suggest the need to rethink the current system of research production and communication in order to promote a more fruitful dialogue between research and practice.

Keywords: Academic Production, Information Technology, Researcher and Practitioner Perceptions, Rigor and Relevance, Theory and Practice

INTRODUCTION

The information technology (IT) field seems to be in crisis from time to time due to an argued lack of identity resulting from factors such as an insufficient process of scale validation, poor definition of concepts, a multidisciplinary perspective that makes it difficult to establish the frontiers of research and action, and the very ephemerality of technology (Alter, 2006; Bakshi & Krishna, 2007; King et al., 2010; Nevo, Nevo & Ein-Dor, 2009). Such concerns along with the need to differentiate IT academic research from business consultancy led the field to adopt
rigid protocols to accept research contributions in IT scholarly journals.

The attractiveness of IT research is also challenged by factors such as the use of complex methodologies, an excessive number of bibliographical references, and a writing style that is hard to assimilate by many readers (Pearson, Pearson & Shim, 2005). Rigor in meeting these standards has been given priority when assessing research to be published. Therefore, considering the need to “publish or perish” for the development of a solid academic career and for contributing to institutional visibility – institutions differ in assessment criteria (Dennis et al., 2006) –, methodology began to outdo pragmatism in research. In fact, Benbasat and Zmud (1999) and Pearson et al. (2005) mention a Business Week survey that reports that up to 80% of management research may be irrelevant for practice. In this scenario, IT would strive to achieve the status of a true discipline.

Our manuscript is part of a broader survey on how research and practice should ideally interact and how they actually interact, with a focus on the reasons, implications and solutions. The survey was done in Brazil, where the authors live and work. Brazil is a country of contrasts, and the IT infrastructure is not an exception: people and businesses suffer from unreliable access to mobile Internet, frequent electric power losses even in big urban areas, regional asymmetries in IT policies that are fueled by political interests, and poor digital literacy of the average population. That survey also investigated how IT research can change this scenario. The first step was to answer the research question that is of interest in our manuscript: What is the perception of Brazilian IT researchers and managers about the attributes of relevant IT research?

The article is structured as follows: first, we make a brief account of the relevance of IT research based on a specific set of factors that may serve to assess relevance; second, we interview key IT researchers and managers in Brazil in order to understand how relevant IT research is according to the experts’ perception; and finally, we discuss reasons and possible interventions.

INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY RESEARCH AND PRACTICE IN BRAZIL

In the second half of the 20th century, business schools faced severe criticism about the quality of their research. In the 1970s and 1980s, assessments about the rigor in management research intensified, and the result was a series of documents with unfavorable statements about the rigor of research in business schools (Robey & Markus, 1998; Davenport & Markus, 1999). Bertero, Caldas and Wood Jr. (1999, p. 151, our translation) believe that this was also the case in the Brazilian production:

[...] our work is written as to be presented [at meetings] and published [in academic journals], and not to be read or applied in subsequent research. (...) many works are less than training exercises with no relevance for knowledge building in the field, both in terms of theory and practice.

In the 1990s, the IT field – that can be framed as a branch of management (Graeml & Macadar, 2010) – gives itself the challenge to become a discipline on its own. Towards that goal, IT researchers assumed that there was a need to invest in methodological rigor. Rigor in fact is an important dimension of research related to the identity of a discipline (Bakshi & Krishna, 2007).

In Brazil, the empowerment of the IT field was effected through a series of structural changes that took place in management research in two broad periods (Mascarenhas, Zambaldi & Moraes, 2011): from the 1940s through the 1980s, and after the 1990s. By the end of World War II, the Brazilian industry emerges and the first business schools attract professionals in search of knowledge. At that time, the publishing companies targeted the emergent managers with directions on how to solve organizational problems and to predict future events. The available literature tried to explain the organizational environment and provide a down-to-earth prescription of actions,
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