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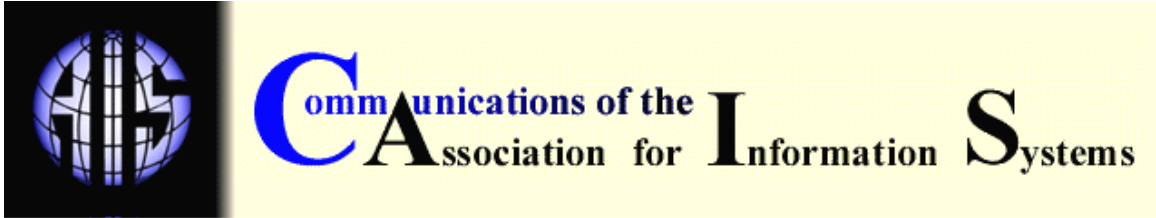
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MAKING ACADEMIC IS RESEARCH MORE RELEVANT TO INDUSTRY VIA OPEN-ARCHITECTURE MODELS FOR CAREER PATHS IN ACADEMIA

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ABSTRACT

Until the debate regarding relevance of IS research to practice is resolved, it is instructive to learn from more established disciplines where previous practical experience is accounted for and valued. In teaching hospitals, academia and practice are interrelated and co-exist. Retired high-ranked military officers are sought for top positions, in business, politics, and academia. Promotion and tenure committees for academic IS departments, wishing to encourage interaction with IS practice, ought not only to recognize practical experience and publications in trade magazines, but also to design open-architecture career paths for smooth transition of IS personnel between industry and academia.

"We need to be more relevant to meet the increasing needs of our students, the organizations that hire them, and the larger society" [Westfall, 1999].

The debate about how relevant academic IS research is to actual IS practice is often viewed as a symptom of a relatively young discipline which is not yet well defined, and still looking for best-practice models. On the other hand, many IS researchers argue that the question is not only irrelevant but also short-term. They view research contributions as long-term in nature.

In our opinion, a necessary condition for relevance of IS research is that it must be well attached to practice. We believe, like McMaster (2/14/2001)¹ that "there is a place for pure theory / philosophy, just as there is a place for practice alone (without theory), however each is undoubtedly impoverished without the other". Since transition of IS knowledge between practice and academia is needed for much more than just teaching, academics who are informed of current business trends and issues are better equipped for both practical and pure research. We thus agree with those who argue, like Rajiv Kohli (2/9/2001) that "the larger issue is 'interaction' between academia and practice." Unfortunately, as shown by Straub (2/10/2001), the current level of interaction is rather low and "there is empirical evidence, in fact, that academics and practitioners have a different worldviews and, are, therefore, different 'audiences.'"

If one accepts the premise that there is not enough interaction between academia and practice, even though such an interaction is essential to making IS research more relevant, then the question is whether the IS career paths in academia can be redesigned to enhance interaction. Jennex (2/12/2001), based on his own experience, notes interaction inhibition by academia, recalling job interviews "where if you were a practitioner and didn't want to do the A journal research you would be offered the 'Lecturer' positions, which do not have tenure and thus, are second class." The basic career model in academia thus prevents transfer of personnel between

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the practical and academic worlds by signaling to practitioners that practical experience is not valued for academic positions.

The same is true in the other direction. Williams (2/9/2001) of Sun Microsystems Inc. pointed out that his staff "avoids academic conferences", including those staff with a Ph.D. degree. A survey of academics posted by Press [2001] shows that 82% of the respondents use academic journals for their research and, at the same time, more than 83% use practical publications for teaching purposes. Thus, while researchers prefer to publish in academic journals, such as MISQ and JAIS for their research, and participate in academic conventions, such as ICIS and AMCIS, they are aware of the need to be up-to-date through practical publications for their teaching. Practitioners, on the other hand, prefer other, more practical publications and conventions.

Clearly, if practitioners and researchers keep apart in terms of reading and life-long learning, they end up in two separate worlds. Unfortunately, the current model of career paths in academia fuels this separation, thus inhibiting the relevance of IS research. In most cases, young doctoral students are required to dedicate most of their time to the academic pursuit, thus detaching themselves from the IS industry early in their career. This early detachment of those who eventually join the academic staff of colleges and universities inevitably opens an unwarranted gap in the IS field between industry and academia. Only in rare cases, which are the exception, do people leave the IS industry and join the academic ranks. Too often, top IS practitioners, who wish to bring their industrial experience to academia, have to start relatively low on the academic ladder in terms of status, power, and pay. The existing career-path model is rather rigid and does not encourage transition of practitioners into the academia since practical achievements are usually not valued in academia.

Because the IS discipline is still young, it might be worthwhile to learn by analogy from other, more established disciplines that have perfected interaction between practice and academia over hundreds of years. In the case of medical and military practitioners, for example previous practical experience is accounted for and valued. In medicine, academia and practice are interrelated and co-exist. In teaching hospitals, professionals are encouraged to devote time to both practice and research. Involvement in practical medicine is not an obstacle, but a requirement! High-rank military officers, in the US and elsewhere, after retiring at a relatively young age, are sought for top positions, in business, in politics, and even in academia. Unlike IS practitioners who wish to enter academia, physician in teaching hospitals move in parallel practical and academic tracks while retired army officers can enter industry or politics at the top and need not re-start from the bottom of the career ladder.

Academic IS departments wishing to encourage interaction with IS practice, might attract personnel from the IS industry by recognizing practical experience as relevant for an academic rank at the level of associate or, in exceptional cases, Full Professor. Where a doctorate degree is required, it might be possible to grant a Pr.D. (Practical Doctorate) rather than a Ph.D., prior to such recruiting. Such an approach will open the doors of academia to practitioners seeking a second career in the academia, helping to close the gap between the two worlds. To improve the interaction between the IS research community and IS industry further, it is important to reduce the reluctance of academic promotion and tenure committees to recognize trade publications as a legitimate publication outlets for researchers.

Just as the IS industry turned away from legacy proprietary systems toward open architectures, we propose that academic and research organization ought to consider adopting open-architecture models for career paths. Such a model should enable smooth transition of personnel, in both directions, between IS industry and academia. We believe that open-architecture models of the kind offered to medical and military practitioners are essential to bringing the practical and academic worlds closer together and are bound to make IS research more relevant to industry.

END NOTES

¹ Dates refer to the dates of the e-mails sent to IS World.

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