Bridging Academic Research and Business Practice with the New Media

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Much academic research on information technology (IT), systems (IS), and management (IM) has been branded by practitioners in business as unusable, irrelevant, and unreadable. Consequently, it is highly unlikely that conventional outlets for such work, e.g. scholarly journals and conference proceedings can receive significant real-world exposure. By reversing the push-pull dynamics of information dissemination and retrieval in the New Media, alternative approaches are emerging. This article presents the history of a case in point with data recorded over a period of 15 months. It is shown that the Internet in general, and the World Wide Web in particular, will be a significant resource in bridging the gap between practice and relevant research.

The Widening Gap between Business Practice and Academic Research

The relevance and applicability of academic research conducted in business schools have long been questioned. In their 1984 *Harvard Business Review* article, Behrman and Levin concluded that:

"For the most part...the research in business administration during the past 20 years would fail any reasonable test of applicability or relevance to consequential management problems or policy issues..."

In the comprehensive review of management education and development, Porter and McKibbin (1988) further distinguished between the relevance of such research and the import of the reported findings. Based on extensive interview and survey data, they observed that the business community knows relatively little about the research programs and their findings. Apart from the routine distribution of a reprint series to supposedly interested parties,

"...most business school professors are purposely aiming their research reports toward their academic brethren and...do not care whether such publications are comprehensible to practicing managers or not."

The result is a pervasive lack of "corporate knowledge" of business school research. This communication gap further deprives academic researchers of the impetus and critical feedback from the business community which may help increase the impact of their work.

Apparently, the situation has not improved significantly since. In Spring 1995 the Board of Directors of the American Assembly of Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB, which has since been renamed The International Association for Management Education) appointed a task force to look at the leadership and development needs of business school faculty and to determine how best to meet those needs. In the report (Urban, 1996) released in April 1996, the primary problem identified was that faculty skills are not aligned with the rapidly changing needs of business, resulting in the widening of the gap between practice and academic research and teaching.

While the above critiques applied to academic research in business in general, the state of affairs specific to the information related fields—information technology (IT), information systems (IS), and information management (IM)—is no exception. To quote Tom Davenport (1997), who is well-established both in practice and in academe:

"The state of IT-oriented research is downright

dismal... Much IT-oriented research is neither comprehensible nor practical...The topics researched are less than au courant... The journals in which academic IT research is published are rarely read by practitioners...They are often unfathomable, even to other academics...[The] publications contain pseudoscientific jargon, arcane statistical techniques and slavish footnoting."

Similar opinion has echoed in the practitioner-oriented press (Alter, 1997):

"Too much academic research on IS is unusable, irrelevant and unreadable. Most professors seem content to write about jargon-filled frameworks, vague theories and marginalia rather than help solve today's nagging problems...Junior faculty members who produce good research are afraid to share it with the press. If they do, they may ruin their chances at publishing it in academic journals and wreck their chances at tenure."

The causes for such criticism are obviously deep-rooted and it will be naive to contemplate any quick fix. Instead, we address one consequence of this apparently pervasive public perception. Since the connotation of academic research has become "esoteric and irrelevant" rather than "rigorous and useful," one may speculate that traditional outlets of scholarly work such as journals and conference proceedings (Hosapple et al., 1994) cannot be effective media to reach a potentially broad audience for relevant results. The question is then: If a professor does come up with research that is relevant, are there alternatives to the established outlets to disseminate such information? We present a case in point and document its development over a period of 15 months. It has implications in establishing the Internet in general, and the World Wide Web in particular, as significant resources in bridging the gap between practice and relevant research.

Academics, Practitioners, and the New Media

Since the conventional medium for the dissemination of academic research is that of the printed journal, it is appropriate to adopt the newsprint industry's terminology of the New Media for Internet-based communication. As the World Wide Web (WWW or Web for short) has emerged as the increasingly dominant application of the Internet to publish and browse information, we assume it to be the primary platform for the New Media. Given the perception among practitioners of printed journals as mostly irrelevant academic research, the natural question is whether the New Media can make any difference. For the answer, we need to examine what initiatives academics have taken on this front.

There is indeed a growing body of literature on scholarly electronic publications (see Bailey, 1997 for a bibliography.) In the IT-research area, there were discussions of a global community of scholars (Watson, 1994), electronic journals as legitimate media (Kling and Covi, 1995), and barriers—motivational, institutional, technical, and philosophical—to adoption (Ives, 1996). Yet, the focus has remained by-and-large "intramural," in the sense of exploring the technical possibilities within the confines of well-set academic values and priorities among scholars. Even in cases that go beyond transplanting old practices to the New Media, implying transformation of processes such as peer review and collaboration, there is little effort in breaking the mold of prevalent academic culture. In brief, the academic trend in deploying the New Media can only lead to the same kind of knowledge base that is of little use to practitioners (Harrison and Stephen, 1996).

This prompted an examination of the underlying issue of information dissemination and retrieval. With the New Media, this has become known as push versus pull (Cortese, 1997). However, any mode of information exchange is a mix of push and pull (DeJesus, 1997). While television broadcasting is considered a prime example of push, the viewer must turn it on (pull) and off. Similarly, while a book sitting on a shelf may suggest pure pull, the process of publishing is push. This last analogy is particularly apt for considering alternative outlets for academic research in the New Media. With the conventional channel of scholarly journals, the perceived quality standards as reflected in the rigor in peer reviews and stringent acceptance rates serve to push its content. Pulling on the part of the reader is more in the nature of "Let's see what is in this issue of a trusted resource" than "Let's see what is out there that I need." An alternative of reversing the relative emphasis on push and pull now emerges.

Methodology

To realize this alternative, we designed the following experiment. Use the timely results of a research project that has obvious relevance to contemporary business interests. Put up a summary page on the Web, including an electronic form for requesting the full report. The process of locating and downloading the report constitutes the pull aspect of this approach. For the push aspect, launch an initial publicity campaign for the research in the business and IT-related press. Record and study the demographics and source of referral of respondents as an indication of the potential of the New Media as an outlet for research results. Finally, identify specific linkages within the New Media as effective elements to bridge the gap between practice and research.

The Case of WWW1000

Currently, the topic of electronic commerce is relevant and timely as businesses large and small are scurrying to stake a presence in this new frontier. Our initiative was based on the following observation. While commercial applications of the Internet, particularly in the form of business sites on the World Wide Web proliferate, on-line business is still rela-

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