Chapter VIII

Rigor, Relevance and Research Paradigms: A Practitioner's Perspective

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ABSTRACT

A practitioner leaves behind the world of failed multimillion-dollar information systems projects to seek solutions in academe. In making the transition from IS practitioner to IS researcher, the author encounters two fundamental tensions regarding the conduct of social science. The first tension concerns the challenge of conducting research meeting the criteria of scientific rigor while addressing issues relevant to practitioners. The second tension centers on the debate concerning the suitability of positivist and non-positivist approaches to research in the social sciences. A review of the literature discussing these tensions led the author to the observation that the two tensions appear to be related. This insight led to the investigation of multi-paradigmatic research frameworks as a means of reconciling these related tensions. The essay provides a personalized account regarding the author's motivation for conducting practitioner-oriented research, the intellectual journey made through the literature to acquire tools of the social science field, and his observations concerning the advantages of multi-paradigmatic research in the IS field.

INTRODUCTION

I was not surprised to learn that the effort to transition from the world of practice to the world of research would be challenging. I was, however, unprepared for the discovery of the diversity of strongly held views regarding the nature of reality and what constitutes valid knowledge. Nor was I prepared to find multiple, seemingly contradictory, goals and approaches to the conduct of social science.

This chapter is essentially a story concerning my effort to understand these philosophical issues and wrestle with their implications regarding the conduct of research in the field of information systems (IS) generally and IS management specifically. My hope is that this analysis of philosophical and methodological issues, by a serious practitioner who wants to become a competent IS researcher, will prove useful to those seeking practical relevance in their research.

I have chosen to present my findings in a confessional narrative form (Schultze, 2000; Van Maanen, 1988). As Schultze (2000) explains, the *confessional* or *vulnerable* genre "exposes the ethnographer, rendering his/her actions, failings, motivations, and assumptions open to public scrutiny and critique" (p. 8). The confessional genre reveals personal motivations and assumptions underlying the author's thinking, thus helping readers to evaluate the text's relevance to their purposes.

WHY THE INTEREST IN I.S. RESEARCH?

It can almost be considered axiomatic that IS failures reflect management problems rather than problems with underlying technology. Accordingly, academicians and practitioners have invested considerable energy in developing policies and prescriptions to strengthen IS management practice (Feeny & Willcocks, 1998; Lewis, 1999; Rockart, Earl, & Ross, 1996; Sambamurthy & Zmud, 1994; Strassmann, 1995; Van Schaik, 1985). Yet, despite years of study and mountains of literature on the subject of IS management, large, medium and small IS management problems continue to occur.

My personal dissatisfaction with IS management practice stemmed from my work with the U.S. Department of Defense (DOD), where I participated in the development of multiple IS programs, each resulting in the waste of hundreds of millions of dollars. While the average taxpayer may find the financial aspects outrageous, what particularly struck me was that these programs failed despite significant investments made by the federal government and the DOD codifying how to manage large, complex programs. In every case, significant effort and expense had gone into complying with federal and DOD information technology (IT) management policies, policies largely consistent with the types of IS management prescriptions found in private-sector and academic literature. While the work was intellectually challenging, I was discouraged to see my colleagues' and my efforts come to naught with the demise of each successive program.[1]

Ironically, working on failed projects can prove financially rewarding to employees if not to employers. These two realities—failed projects and financial success—motivated and enabled me to return to graduate school. My goal was to better understand why, in the face of numerous and long-standing management prescriptions, IS management was so difficult. It did not seem that practitioners had the answers so, after 15 years in practice, I returned to academe to attain a better understanding of practice. I entered a master's degree program in information resources management.

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