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Recker, Jan C. and Young, Raymond and Darroch, Fiona and Marshall, Peter and McKay, Judith (2009) *ACIS 2007 panel report : lack of relevance in IS research*. Communications of the Association for Information Systems, 24(18). pp. 303-314.

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Communications of the Association for Information Systems

Volume 24

2009

Article 18

ACIS 2007 Panel Report: Lack of Relevance in IS Research

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Jan Recker, Raymond Young, Fiona Darroch, Peter Marshall, and Judy McKay

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KEYWORDS: rigor, relevance, IS scholarship, research quality framework, research measures, panel data, networks and communities

Communications of the Association for Information Systems

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ACIS 2007 Panel Report: Lack of Relevance in IS Research

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Volume 24, Article 18, pp. 303-314, February 2009

I. INTRODUCTION

Does IS research produce the knowledge that today's IS professionals can apply in their daily work? Does it address the problems or challenges that are of concern to IS professionals? Does it focus on current technological and business issues? Are IS research articles accessible to IS professionals?

These were the questions that Benbasat and Zmud [1999] posed to the IS community 10 years ago. They argued that the IS discipline overemphasizes rigor at the cost of relevance. They argued that the legitimacy of our discipline may be at risk if IS research fails to produce relevant outcomes that will educate the next wave of IS professionals. The IS discipline must also provide fertile ground for disseminating knowledge and providing leadership to organizations on the effective management and utilization of information technologies.

In their commentary, Benbasat and Zmud [1999] suggested nine guidelines on how to improve, practice, and demonstrate relevance in IS articles without compromising rigor. Eight of their recommendations relate to how authors can improve their work. Most of these eight recommendations have, over time, motivated other researchers to add to this list of recommendations. Lyytinen and King [2004], for example, support Benbasat and Zmud's call, but they question the need for a defined core. Davenport and Markus [1999], as well as Moody [2000], argue for fundamental change and suggest IS should emulate applied disciplines such as medicine and law rather than business. Lee [1999] agrees and adds that successful IS research requires the production of knowledge about how to intervene in the world and change it to satisfy real world needs. Last but not least, Rosemann and Vessey [2008] suggest an applicability check method for IS authors to evaluate the relevance of their research to practitioners.

Notwithstanding the impact that these author guidelines may have had, very little—if any—progress has been made in addressing Benbasat and Zmud's [1999, p. 12] ninth recommendation:

Editors and editorial boards of all IS journals need to critically examine their current postures, reviewing procedures, and editorial decisions concerning the balance between rigor and relevance with the goal of publishing manuscripts that are characterized by both.

Benbasat and Zmud [1999, p. 12] clearly argue that editors and reviewers should send signals to IS scholars that a balance of rigor and relevance is not only fostered but also encouraged. Almost 10 years later, a fundamental question remains: Does our discipline adhere to this recommendation? Is relevance a factor in acceptance/rejection decisions at IS conferences and/or journals, and, if so, does it count as much as rigor?

To address these and related questions, Young and Darroch [2006] developed and pilot tested an IS relevance index as a complement to traditional IS conference reviews. Over 2005 and 2006, authors and reviewers of papers submitted to the Australasian Conference on Information Systems (ACIS), one of the premier IS conferences under the banner of the Association for Information Systems, were asked to assess the relevance of submissions to various stakeholder audiences. At ACIS 2007 in Toowoomba, Australia, a panel was then formed to debate the issue of IS relevance and to reflect critically on the IS relevance index project.

This paper summarizes this panel debate and strives to accomplish two objectives. The first is to present the idea of the IS relevance index and to highlight some results from its implementation, and the second is to present, and discuss, the viewpoints of the invited panelists on this topic.

The remainder of the paper is organized as follows. In Section II, the IS relevance index is described, including a summary of its pilot applications during ACIS 2005 and ACIS 2006. In Section III, the panel debate is summarized. Section IV concludes this paper with a summary of the panel discussion and a conclusion.

II. THE IS RELEVANCE INDEX

Background

The IS relevance index was developed to reflect Benbasat and Zmud's [1999, p. 12] guidelines for relevance in IS. In doing so, the objective was to define an index to measure the *relevance* of a particular research paper submission and to ascertain the *audience(s)* to whom the paper would be relevant. The key stakeholder audiences in IS were

identified by Hirschheim and Klein [2003] as: IS academics, non-IS academics, practitioners and executives. These stakeholder groups were differentiated in the index. In addition, ACIS 2006 organizers suggested subdividing the executive audience into IS and non-IS executives and adding three additional stakeholder groups (Students by coursework, Society and Government). Relevance was defined as relating to:

1. Overall relevance of topic (a critical success factor, an ongoing issue, a problem to which we have been unable to find a solution, probably important in 3-5 years, and so on); or
2. Relevance of frameworks and/or concepts introduced (because they are intuitively meaningful, makes sense of phenomena in ways to make them seem less complex, and so on); or
3. Relevance of findings (by stimulating critical thought with implications for any of the stakeholders, being implementable, useful in teaching material, and so on).

With this framework, respondents were asked to assess the relevance of papers for the different stakeholder audiences on a five-point Likert-type with the end points “strongly disagree” and “strongly agree.”

Benbasat and Zmud’s recommendation that style be a criterion for relevance [1999, p. 12] was not incorporated into the index, because it was assumed that the writing style for an academic conference or journal would be largely irreconcilable with the most appropriate writing styles for other stakeholder audiences (e.g., practitioners). The scope was therefore limited to the attempt of identifying articles with content relevant to the stakeholder audiences. It was assumed that articles would require rewriting to address the issue of accessibility of style.

Pilot Study

A pilot study was conducted in 2006 [Young and Darroch, 2006]. Two scholars reviewed all abstracts of papers accepted for ACIS2005 and rated them according to the guidelines described previously. This approach has some justification, because most readers review the abstract only when deciding whether or not to read an article [Klein *et al.*, 2006]. The evaluations in the pilot were consistent with the approach recommended by Klein *et al.* [2006]. In particular, assessments were not based on a normative value-based judgment of whether the paper “should be” relevant to a particular stakeholder audience. Assessments of relevance were based on the reviewers’ understanding of what might be accepted for publication in a journal targeted at a specific stakeholder audience.

From a study perspective, this approach implied that a second stage was necessary to validate the index. The papers identified as relevant had to be externally reviewed by a representative stakeholder audience to validate that they were in fact relevant. This was not done for the pilot study because it was decided to seek more maturity in the concept before making any demands on the goodwill of colleagues belonging to the various stakeholder groups.

From a results perspective, the pilot demonstrated, first, that data could be collected with relatively little effort to calculate an IS Relevance Index. Second, it showed that, based on the most favorable reviewer’s rating, the validation of the index by a stakeholder audience would be logistically feasible. Between two to four papers were given a 5 rating by one or more reviewers. Consequently, in order to validate the index, only these papers would need to be reviewed, and confirmed as relevant, by a representative stakeholder audience. The pilot results identified a further 21 to 36 abstracts that were given a 4 rating by one or more reviewers within each stakeholder group. This group of papers could be classified as “potentially relevant.” Reviewing these additional abstracts would require a nontrivial yet feasible commitment from an interested collaboration partner or conference sponsor. Third, the pilot demonstrated that the interpretation of the results was likely to have meaning, with only 7 percent of the assessments being significantly different between reviewers (i.e. inter-reviewer agreement was reasonably high).

The pilot study further found that the papers identified as relevant for students (i.e., that scored a 5 rating by one or more reviewers in this category) were also identified as relevant to the IS practitioner, and the IS and non-IS executive audience groups. This suggested the “IS student” category introduced little additional value as an additional stakeholder group. In contrast, the ‘government audience’ category proved to be a very valuable inclusion, with three strong recommendations (i.e., a 5 rating) and 21 possible recommendations (i.e., a 4 rating). Another finding was that the papers identified as relevant to the ‘society’ stakeholder group produced only three possible recommendations (i.e., a 4 rating) across all papers considered, all of which had already been identified as relevant to the other stakeholder groups.

Following the pilot study, a second study was done using ACIS 2007 data. In this case the questions were embedded into the conference submission software and both reviewers and authors were asked to rate relevance based on the same criteria and a full reading of the paper. It was made clear that relevance reviews were voluntary, author and reviewer anonymity would be preserved, and relevance was not a criterion for acceptance in this year’s review. General comments were also solicited.

This second pilot demonstrated that automating the process of gathering data can be implemented with relative ease. The reviewer and author comments were largely favorable (44 percent, 16 in total), with 15 comments (39 percent) being neutral, raising questions such as, for instance, whether relevance could be measured, and six negative comments (17 percent) suspicious of how the measure will be used. Table 1 summarizes the unique comments received by authors and reviewers alike. It omits comments that largely overlap with the comments displayed, as well as comments not relevant to the discussion presented in this paper.

Table 1. Selected Responses Received on the IS Relevance Index

Originator	Comment
Author	I think this is wonderful. I pride myself on producing research that is relevant to IS practitioners and professionals. This paper definitely is so and I would welcome more emphasis at ACIS for papers that have relevance for practice.
Reviewer	Yes, it should definitely become a criterion, especially for conferences. As it is, no practitioner reads our journals and those articles. Conferences are the only venue, where there is a possibility of some practitioners attending it.
Reviewer	I fear the academic field of Information Systems is doomed to obscurity unless we start producing research that the business community can use. Too often, I find papers with poorly thought out ideas and mind-numbing statistics are accepted over papers that explore an area that explores a real world problem in business and then write and present the results in a way that non-academics can understand. Yes, I believe that relevance to practice should be a criterion for acceptance of papers at ACIS.
Author	Relevance I believe is quite important if we have to improve our image in the industry. At present, industry tends to think we academics are far from the reality and do our own research which may not have any relevance to their problems. We should encourage researchers working on the industry problems—with more emphasis on practical relevance, than on theoretical contribution.
Reviewer	Relevance is an important issue and should be part of the acceptance criteria in an applied discipline.
Author	In fields such as IS, relevance to practitioners is probably just as important as relevance to the general academic community.
Author	Relevance in my eyes is a necessary but not sufficient condition for good research. There are so many topics of great relevance that call for further research that papers with no apparent relevance should not even come in question for publication.
Author	The IS discipline is dead in the water if it ignores relevance for the sake of strong rigor. On the other hand, I do not favor impact systems that can act to distort what is researched, for the sake of securing tenure and promotion for example.
Reviewer	I think it is important that academic papers show relevance as this is one way for academia to provide guidance based on sound research to governments, industry and the community at large. I think relevance should form part of the acceptance criteria.
Author	This is wonderful as this paper scores very, very high on the relevance scale. All my research has relevance for business, but few papers appeal to such a wide range of audiences at such a high level, and I have ticked the boxes above accordingly.
Reviewer	There is a place for pure academic research but the current balance should be reversed in my view. Papers should indicate why the research is important, and to whom.
Reviewer	Relevance as expressed in the question above may or may not be appropriate in an exercise such as RQF (I tend to believe that it should be included) but this does not mean that it should be specifically included in acceptance criteria for conferences—I suspect that papers that are not relevant to the general theme of a particular conference are not likely to be accepted.
Reviewer	If ACIS starts accepting all papers, even those not relevant to IS professionals, the attendance at conferences will suffer. ACIS should not try to be all things to all people but focus on informing and sharing current IS professionals and academics.
Reviewer	In my opinion, the assessment of relevance is too subjective to be used as a meaningful criterion.

Author	I think there will be plenty of pressure on academics to conform to RQF frameworks without ACIS joining in too. We need to allow space for theory, speculation and non-mainstream work.
Author	I am not convinced that the "paper" is the right level at which such a test should be applied in isolation. It might be more appropriate to apply this test at either "conference" or "stream within conference." That would then provide for a better match between papers submitted and nature of the conference. ACIS has not made such a decision, so how would the issue of relevance be determined and applied?
Author	No, that would be accepting government control. Our standards should be higher than that because funding schemes will come and go.
Author	Not being an Australian academic, I am not aware of the specific details from the Australian Government, however I would think that non government-funded conferences should not include such criteria. The only real criterion is academic quality.

The findings of the first study were largely replicated with the "most favorable reviewer rating," which was found to be the most meaningful measure to construct a relevance index. For instance, an average reviewer rating was at stages problematic to calculate because there was not always data from two reviewers). Table 2 gives the results.

Table 2. Summary Statistics Based on Most Favorable Reviewer's Rating											
		This paper would be relevant to:									
		IS Academics	Non-IS academics	IS Practitioners	Senior IS Executives	Executive Management	Students	Society	Government	Overall	Overall (excluding IS Academics)
<i>Strongly Agree</i>	5	41	8	23	19	13	16	10	19	63	52
<i>Tend to Agree</i>	4	62	61	60	44	42	55	34	36	58	62
<i>Neutral</i>	3	21	42	26	39	37	36	48	43	15	20
<i>Tend to Disagree</i>	2	11	22	26	18	25	24	27	24	8	10
<i>Strongly Disagree</i>	1	8	9	8	23	26	9	23	20	0	0
Summary Statistics											
# reviews		143	142	143	143	143	140	142	142	144	144
average		3.8	3.3	3.4	3.1	2.9	3.3	2.9	3.1	3.0	4.2
% would be relevant		29%	6%	16%	13%	9%	11%	7%	13%	44%	36%
% probably relevant		43%	43%	42%	31%	29%	39%	24%	25%	40%	43%

Authors rated the relevance of their papers higher than the reviewers with 73 percent of the authors considering their papers to be strongly relevant to at least one stakeholder audience other than IS academics. This finding may suggest that, according to authors' perceptions, there is no problem with relevance in IS research; however, contrasting these results to the most favorable reviewer ratings suggests otherwise. According to the most favorable reviewer, only 36 percent of papers were considered to be highly relevant to at least one stakeholder audience other than IS academics.

After conducting two years of pilot studies, the combined results were revisited to frame the question of whether the development and use of an IS relevance index is a worthwhile exercise. The index may provide a simple, quantifiable metric indicator of research relevance and may thereby act as a prompt to change the behavior of authors and editors alike toward more relevant IS research. Whether or not this is truly the case, should be the case, or what else could be done, was discussed at the panel at ACIS 2007.

III. THE PANEL

Panelists were invited to ACIS 2007 in Queensland, Australia, to present their views on the debate on lack of relevance in IS research. In preparation for this panel, each invited panelist was given background information on the index, and was presented with the results from the two years of pilot study. During the panel session, the panelists presented their positions on the IS relevance index, their insights into the IS relevance issue in general, and discussed with the audience how the issue of lack of relevance can be addressed. The specific objectives of the panel were:

1. To present their viewpoint on the issue of lack of relevance and to suggest potential reasons for this situation;
2. To discuss whether the proposed IS relevance index is worth pursuing as a means to increase awareness for, and attention to, relevance in IS research; and
3. To discuss most appropriate ways of collecting data and knowledge on the relevance of IS.

In the following, the individual panel contributions from four panel members are summarized.

Surely There's a Better Way. . . (Raymond Young)

As a former CIO of a major Australian organization, I had never come across the academic IS research. Perhaps this was because my convoluted career had spanned medicine, architecture, education, and business administration before I stumbled into the IS world. I stumbled in because no one in the IT department could be trusted, because none of them understood the business. So, armed with an MBA, a number of years in consulting and an intuitive talent for IS, I was thrust into senior management with the task of cleaning it up. For the most part, my projects succeeded, but it was a hit-and-miss affair, with the IT experts hindering as much as they were helping. It seemed to me that projects run by gut feel and intuition had better results than the projects that were led by my experts. One guru even had the gall to say to me years later that "I never say it can be done until I see it working." From the perspective of a senior manager, you can't get more useless than that. Competitive pressures were forcing me to take a punt based on intuition that something should be possible, because my experts were too scared to provide any guidance on how the boundaries could be more safely explored.

When I started a Ph.D to get to the bottom of the problem, I waded through article after article of useless information before finally finding something of value. It took me a very long time to accept that the majority of what had been published was irrelevant. Surely so many smart people couldn't have spent so much time to produce something of so little practical value? Had I missed something? I think not. I eventually found that all Ph.D students in the IS discipline go through a very similar experience. Many younger Ph.Ds naively accept the initiation rite that to be awarded a Ph.D requires the publication of a number of rigorous research papers. The more relevant or interesting papers were perceived to be more risky and the general advice was to defer to them the later years of an academic career.

As a middle-aged Ph.D, I didn't have the luxury of all that many later years. I needed to make my discovery now, and I needed it to be relevant. What I discovered has the potential to increase GDP by 1-3 percent in a developed economy! What I would have given to know this during my practitioner days.

Most of what I discovered had been relatively clearly stated in 1963. My contribution was to trawl through four decades of academic trivia to find the few extra insights since this time and pull it all together. Is this why we call it research? In industry we call that rework or non value-adding activity. Surely there is a better way. Even so, change does not happen just because it is better. There are winners and loser from change, so we need to overcome the inertia with firstly a compelling reason for change and then a mechanism to drive change. The experiments with the Relevance Index have potential as a mechanism to drive change. I urge the IS community to embrace it, refine it and use it. The alternative is oblivion because the world is moving on.

Relevance and the Question of Context (Peter Marshall)

Relevance is an important consideration in planning and assessing IS research. Why is that? Because relevance of research means research that is useful and helpful to the major potential stakeholders of IS research, including, for instance:

- ICT & business students
- ICT professionals

- Consultants to business and government, as well as
- Managers in business and government

Moreover, relevant IS research provides sense-making frameworks and concepts that enable better planning and management of IS and IT. In light of these observations, I doubt that anyone would not concede that relevance is important to IS research. So why do we have an issue with relevance—whether it is planning, addressing, measuring, or establishing IS research relevance?

I believe we are in the situation we are in because there are difficult issues of subjectivity and context related to assessing the concept of relevance. For instance, what do we mean by “relevant research”? Research that is relevant to whom? Research that is relevant where and when? In other words, what is the context in which research is—or is not—relevant? Taking a close look at reality of IS, we must respond to the following:

- Managers or ICT professionals in business and government do not read IS research papers.
- Consultants to business and government do not read IS research papers.
- Students only read IS research papers when they are forced to.

In other words, our target audiences do not find our papers relevant. Why is that so?

I believe it is partly, because most IS research is positivist-oriented research that simplifies the real complexities of organizational life and tries to “prove” things, taking traditional science as its preferred model. Relevant research, however, should address issues that are critically important for IS and IT in business and government. In other words, IS researchers should utilize research methods that enable them to keep in touch with critical issues or issues that are important to ICT professionals and managers in business and government. These arguments, of course, have been voiced many times before, but positivist IS research continues to dominate the major IS journals [e.g., Chen and Hirschheim, 2004].

To attain relevance, IS research must address, and include, the social, political and organizational context essential to making sense of real IS problem situations. Concerning an appropriate choice of research methods, I would argue that qualitative and/or interpretivistic research tends to lead to relevant research outcomes while positivistic methods tend to lead to simplistic and irrelevant research outcomes. This is because positivistic research often attempts to strip away the complexities of situated reality and context, so as to “prove” universal and objective “truths.”

As an example of an appropriate research method, consider interpretivistic action research. I would argue that action research tends to lead to particularly relevant research outcomes. This is because action research involves researchers and practitioners collaboratively, solving real problems of genuine and critical concern in actual organizational settings.

Having made a plea for qualitative and interpretivistic research, I should add a note of caution. Even with such a choice of research methods, there is no guarantee of achieving relevance. Qualitative and interpretivistic research can only lead to relevant research outcomes, if:

- The researcher is aware of organizational and business realities, and chooses problems and research opportunities well;
- The research design is well constructed; and
- The research is executed professionally and rigorously

In conclusion, although there are some issues and difficulties associated with measuring IS relevance (for instance, through a tool like the suggested IS relevance index), I am in favor of any proposal that may contribute towards increasing the relevance of IS research. In doing so, however, it will be essential not to arrive at a situation in which academics make the only judgments about relevance—we need to get ICT professionals, senior managers, and other key IS stakeholders into the assessment process somehow.

What Is Being Measured Gets Done and What Is Not Being Measured Does Not Get Done (Jan Recker)

In my panel commentary, I tried to address two main questions:

- Is the issue of relevance worth pursuing?

- Is the proposed relevance index worth pursuing?

My take on these questions is heavily influenced by an old saying—what gets measured gets addressed. I believe that in our effort to understand our current situation in respect to the issue of relevance, as well as in our effort to anticipate appropriate ways forward towards more relevance in IS research, we should take a close look at some of the practices employed when publishing IS research. Why? Because publications are our bread and butter, our most important research outcome, the basis of our incentive scheme for career progression as well as our primary means of communicating with our stakeholders—be it students, managers, professionals, consultants or whoever else.

Now, what exactly does our publication process look like? Is relevance a factor in acceptance/rejection decisions at IS publication outlets and, if so, does it count as much as rigor? And ultimately, what kind of articles are being published—rigorous ones or relevant ones?

In fact, I would argue that our problem with relevance in IS research is that, at present, there are few incentives for researchers to conduct research, or publish a paper, that is relevant to practice. This is most likely due to the perception that relevance is not valued by the top IS research journals and conferences. Second, I believe there is a widespread perception that it is impossible to attain both rigor and relevance in research, and instead rigor and relevance are most often viewed as conflicting research objectives, that is, as the two extreme points of a continuum (see Figure 1). This could be the reason why a lot of papers are not relevant—because relevance was seen to be compromised so that required rigor standards of conferences and/or journals can be met.

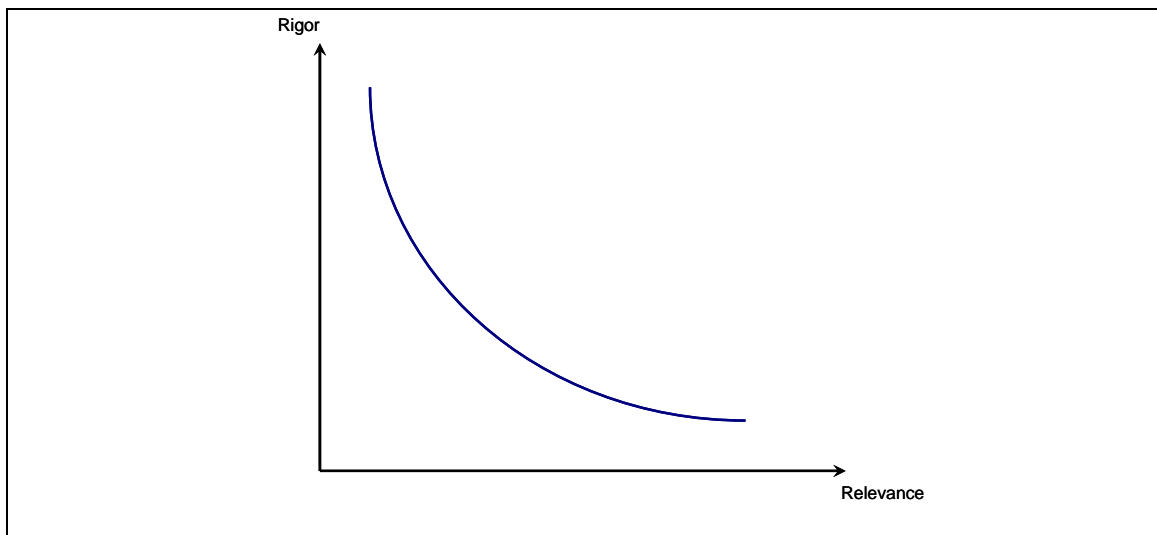


Figure 1. Rigor versus Relevance

So what can be done? My argument is to look at the measurements employed to understand “what gets addressed.” In other words, do our review practices, in which criteria-based measurements are being used to judge a submission, adequately reflect rigor or relevance?

It is not my intent at this stage to assess each and every review criterion; however, my strong contention (“hunch,” if you like) is that typical review criteria such as technical soundness, methodology used, theoretical strength, and so on, mostly pertain to assessments of rigor. But what is in place to assess relevance? Originality of a submission? This measure could also address original ways of executing certain methods, let’s say, an original application of survey research. Relevance to conference? This criterion is very restrictive in that it only is of interest to the conference organizers—most notably, academics. Presentation/clarity of writing? Undoubtedly an important criterion—but not one that reflects relevance to an IS audience.

In other words, my feeling is that we do not employ relevance as an important criterion in deciding which types of papers to publish at our conferences or journals. Indeed, I would suspect that only the set of factors that reflect rigor (e.g., technical quality, soundness, methodology) count when it comes to the acceptance/rejection decision. What are the implications if I’m right? We, as a discipline, only target rigorous publications, neglecting relevant ones. Clearly, such a move will not entice target stakeholder groups to read our papers; moreover, this situation also does not entice us as researchers to produce more relevant research, or to put more emphasis on relevance when writing our papers. Why would any IS scholar care about relevance if relevance aspects are not influential to the fundamental decision whether we get our paper accepted?

So, in light of these arguments I believe that we as a discipline should move forward to measuring IS relevance. I deem it essential to stipulate new incentives both for publishing and editorial work. Without incentives, motivations to change may be sporadic, spurious or transient at best. Do I believe this is an easy task? No. Is the current version of the IS relevance index the right way to go? I don't know. Nevertheless, just because something may be hard or complicated, or just because the first prototype may not meet all requirements, should not make something an impediment to the overall endeavor. After all, we are researchers and tackling hard and complicated issues is exactly what we set out to do.

Relevance—One of these Unarguable Things (Judy McKay)

Before I even start with my commentary, I think it appropriate to declare my own bias upfront: I am a devoted action researcher and a strong proponent of interpretivist research in information systems—both of which will become apparent in my forthcoming comments.

The issue of relevance—or the measurement thereof—is a delicate issue. Of course, when looking at research governance, we have a need to ensure that scarce research funds and resources are not being wasted by academics in funding indulgence or whim. In other words, every IS researcher must be accountable and held responsible for appropriate use of public monies and other resources. This would be a supporting argument in favor of a way of measuring IS relevance. A measure of relevance might enable us to establish that public monies were being allocated to support research activities that deliver “benefit” to various stakeholders and that the research outcomes were useful to those stakeholders. Amongst these stakeholders groups in IS would be many businesses, government, and other organizations.

However, a relevance index (of whatever form) may potentially be just another form of economic rationalism if we consider the following argumentation:

1. Universities (and the research they do) exist to support the accumulation of wealth and capital for corporations.
2. “Relevant” research will speed up this process.
3. Therefore, relevant research is “good.”

If we drive this line of thinking too far, then we overlook what I would argue to be other “softer” benefits from research.

As indicated by this line of argument, I have, in fact, a number of concerns with measuring relevance. Simply put, what exactly is relevance? Is it an intrinsic attribute of research conducted—or of a research paper? In other words, do researchers put relevance into their research or in their paper development? If so, we may in fact have an attribute that we could label “objective relevance”—but I doubt it. Isn't it more realistic that relevance is an outcome of the interaction of researchers with a “consumer” (with values, motives, needs, and so on) of that research, with this interaction leading to research that is “relevantly” situated in time, space, culture, history? If we consider this argument, then, relevance is by definition subjective. And it would also mean that there is no relevance at all in research until the very research is found useful to someone within a context, for meeting a need, for addressing objectives, and for delivering value. I would thus argue, that in our effort to understand IS research relevance, we need to understand to whom our research may be relevant, in what contexts research may be relevant, and to what motives, values, agendas or interests our research applies in being relevant. In trying to answer these questions, I believe that very soon we will arrive at another question: Does relevance depend on state of knowledge, needs and interests of a consumer at a particular time within a particular context? Who should make such assessments? And what do we do with the answer to this question?

In closing my commentary, I would like to raise another critical issue: Who actually suggested that our research should be relevant? Do we have incentives schemes to produce or foster relevant research? I think we do not. If we wanted to foster relevance, why doesn't a publication in a CIO magazine (or the like) “count” in terms of promotion or prestige as an academic? I believe it is more realistic to say that relevance to academics is more of a sideshow in our prowess as academics—which is signaled through our publication track record, the amount of funding received, and the other typical measures. Interestingly, not all IS communities measure alongside these dimensions. For a proposal from Denmark, for instance, two measures are being proposed that act as relevance indicators (applied to groups of researchers), these being “business related significance” (measured through aspects such as the ratio of research income from the private sector, the number of companies utilizing research findings as part of their knowledge base, and the number of patent applications and/or royalties), and ‘societal significance’ (measured through aspects such as the involvement of a research group in graduate level education, or the extent to which a

research group supplies research-based service, or performs research-based tasks of significance for society) [Danish Council for Research Policy, 2006].

For us, a way forward could be to attempt to broaden our target goals for IS research. In addition to economic benefits, shouldn't we think about research that offers broad community benefits and improvements to spiritual and social dimensions of our societies, in addition to those important economic benefits?

In conclusion, I believe that engaging closely with industry is important, and I think that relevance is important; however, an attempt to ascribe an index of relevance that is unchanging over time and irrespective of the consumer of the research and their situatedness in time, space, and culture worries me.

Reflections (Fiona Darroch)

The relevance index was the current focus of a joint project initiated by Raymond Young and myself, the aim of which was to explore practical means of addressing the issue of IS research relevance. My collaboration with Raymond arose from his feedback on my earlier studies on research relevance [Darroch and Toleman, 2004; 2005]. After conducting two years of pilot studies, I saw the ACIS panel as an opportunity to "air" this very important issue at an important and widely attended venue, given that ACIS is the premier IS conference in Australasia. Presenting it in a panel forum would facilitate wider debate within the IS academic community and provide them with an opportunity to hear in person what the current thinking is. The panel and the relevance Index both offered a much-needed shift from reflection to action.

I was disappointed to see how few delegates attended the session, especially given the conference theme of "The 3 Rs: Research, Relevance and Rigour—Coming of Age." That indicates to me that the issue is still not seen by many as one of critical import to the future of the IS academic community. My background as a practitioner coming into academia has heightened and influenced my interest in the relevance debate and resulted in it being a key element of my doctoral studies. On this occasion, I was content to play a background role by focusing my efforts on working on the project, but limiting my panel involvement to responding to questions and comments. This decision was predicated on the erroneous assumption that there would be lively audience participation.

My thoughts on the actual relevance index are that whilst I acknowledge the inherent problems of ascribing a rating to relevance (and accepting that we may make some mistakes in attempting to do so), I consider it to be far more serious to take no action at all. The issue has been theorized over for too long, and it is high time for some decisive action. When Raymond and I had formative discussions about this project, we recognized that there would be challenges, as it is not only a complex issue, but one which is entrenched, and one which has the potential to be confronting and divisive. Thus we saw that the most prospective course was to give it a low key entry, where it would not be used as a decision-making tool. We could take an iterative approach to its development and refinement, similar to what one would take with a system development wherein the requirements were uncertain. Recognizing the longevity of the problem, it was also clear that this would need to be viewed as a longer term project. Thus it was also our desire to collect meaningful longitudinal data, which would act as a barometer of change over the longer term.

Another appealing characteristic of the index was that it could be made suitable for inclusion into a large number of IS conferences, and thus with minimal effort, it could build up an emerging picture across many different sub-communities within IS. Its inclusion into both the online submission and reviewing systems also facilitated anonymous data collection from a wide array of respondents, capturing the perspectives of both authors and reviewers. The inclusion of qualitative responses was a key contributor to the value of the data. Overall, we considered it to be a most efficient and effective means of delivering a rich data source. Incorporating it into the systems also presented the opportunity to raise the issue widely within the IS academic community, and thus set them thinking about it. Awareness is an invaluable tool when trying to engender cultural change.

The relevance index may not end up being part of the solution for the IS academic community to address research relevance. Nevertheless, the problem will not go away, and it will be incumbent on those empowered within academic ranks to seek out other ways of addressing the problem, as well as being responsible for taking decisive action.

IV. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

This article reports the outcome of a panel on an IS relevance index at the Australasian Conference on Information Systems, held in Toowoomba, Australia, in December 2007. Section II of this article introduces the previous work on an IS relevance index as a complement to conference review practices, and Section III of this article contains the

viewpoints of the panelists on the general issue of lack of relevance in IS research, and on the question whether the suggested IS relevance index would be an appropriate means to stimulate more attention to relevance in IS research.

We hope that this report helps shed lights on some common concerns and questions in the debate on the lack of relevance in IS research. Panelists and audience members alike strongly believe that the importance of relevance in IS research is a fundamental challenge to our discipline, and it is key to creating impact beyond pure academic outlets. Still, the panel discussion made one aspect crystal-clear: the lack of relevance in IS research remains a key issue that has yet to be fully recognized or articulated and warrants further study. The panelists at ACIS 2007 highlighted some of issues surrounding this topic. Clearly, the set of issues uncovered during the panel is neither exhaustive nor mutually exclusive. Yet, in hindsight, the issues uncovered raised a number of questions, partly addressed during the panel and partly emerging through later reflections on the panel, that are worthwhile to list here to motivate further debate about why the lack of relevance in IS research persists. It is hoped that an answer to some or all of these questions may provide a pathway for extirpating this problem:

- Is there a common, consistent and coherent understanding of relevance in IS research?
- Is relevance a problem of scholars seeking to publish, or a more fundamental issue originating in the organizational, institutional or ethical practices governing the IS research discipline?
- Can relevance be measured? Should it even be made measurable? And if not, what other incentive mechanisms exist to increase attention to this aspect of research?

In conclusion, the panel was a refreshing collection of warnings, scoffs, optimistic and skeptical fascination surrounding the issue of lack of relevance and the idea of a relevance measurement instrument. While, as outlined in this report, the panelists presented different viewpoints on the topic, the panel struck one chord that resonates broadly and in unison—suggesting that indeed there is something that remains to be done to increase relevance in IS research. One key outcome from the panel was that we are still underway to fully understanding or appreciating the concept, and importance, of research relevance. If we are to increase relevance in IS research, then a first step would be to more clearly understand, appreciate and define the notion of relevance.

We hope that this report helps the panel attendees better understand the key points made by the panelists. Further, this report purports to reach interested colleagues and fellows, who could not attend the panel, to understand and appreciate one of the most fundamental meta-debates in the IS discipline. Also, we would like to invite comments and responses on the panelists' views, as well as on the suggested IS relevance measurement index, from those fellow IS scholars that argue the case that IS research is indeed relevant. In the end, we hope that we motivate further discussion and work on the issue of lack of relevance.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We wish to thank the organizing committee of ACIS 2007 for their comments to the panel proposal and for accepting and facilitating the panel. We also would like to thank all the authors and reviewers during ACIS 2005-7 that participated in the IS relevance index study.

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Communications of the Association for Information Systems

ISSN: 1529-3181

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