

# INFORMATION SYSTEMS RESEARCH THAT REALLY MATTERS: BEYOND THE IS RIGOR VERSUS RELEVANCE DEBATE

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Few would refute the view that information systems have and will continue to make significant impacts on our societies. There is almost no area of human endeavor that has been untouched by information technology-based information systems. In some areas, IS has had a positive effect (finding survivors after natural disasters such as the Tsunami), while in others, the misuse of IS has aided in awe-inspiring destruction (the 9/11 attacks were planned, coordinated, and executed using a wide range of technology infrastructures).

The instances of disasters and emergencies are only *one* example of areas of human endeavor where the role of IS is salient. Other examples of critical areas include modernizing healthcare delivery, improving social development in underdeveloped nations, and improving the quality of life. Given the continuing certainty of disasters, emergencies, and other societal needs, one would expect IS research and researchers to be the most sought-after sources of expertise and knowledge on critical problems of our society. However, this is not always the case.

The goal of this panel is to commence a debate on how best to move the IS research agenda forward with a view to making *significant* impacts in society. For research to make a significant impact on society, it must be not only rigorous and relevant, but also show concern for pressing problems of our society.

While the panel members believe in the broader role of IS researchers in society, they disagree on how best to move IS research ahead in order to have significant impact. Do we need to do some in-house cleaning (e.g., do a better job of making IS research attractive to IS practitioners) within the IS research domain before we are ready to target a more-diverse group of stakeholders? Do we need to move to a research model where the emphasis is on cutting-edge industry projects? Or is the answer to be found in considering a broader range of problems (e.g., problems with broader societal impact)? The panel members will also address the pragmatic issues (e.g., research funding, promotion and tenure issues, senior leadership, etc.) involved in encouraging the IS academy to accept and conduct such research.

Together audience and panel members will

- (1) debate how we define the boundaries of the discipline and how we might identify appropriate stakeholders
- (2) discuss understudied problems that have significant potential for IS research
- (3) debate how IS research can be made more significant by improving the internal processes and practices within the domain, and by being more conscious of our external orientation by studying significant societal problems

**Kevin Desouza** will focus on issues of problem selection and knowledge creation. He will argue that the answer to increasing the impact of IS research can be found in how we choose problems to study. He will address difficulties in studying problems in areas that have a serious need for IS research by drawing on his experience researching intelligence failures in sensitive

operations and organizations. He will discuss strategies (e.g. partnering with external research institutes and think-tanks, speaking at industry meetings and conferences, collaborative book writing for the professional trade market, etc.) for gaining awareness of significant problems, getting access to data and sources, and engaging external stakeholders in research projects. He will also share his views on how doctoral candidates should be provided training, counsel, and incentives to take on riskier research projects so as to challenge some of the fundamental assumptions of the field, in the hopes of breaking new ground and conducting significant IS research.

**Omar El Sawy** will argue against the position that we should look at broad societal problems. His contention is that we must first focus on our own backyard by helping practitioners in organizations, a job we fail to do well even now. We then will be in a better position to generate useful practices that can be transferred to solve critical problems by others who perhaps know more about the problems than we do. He believes that a prerequisite to doing research that has a visible impact on society is understanding how to do so, including how to more effectively structure and shape the way that practitioners participate in IS research, while leading rather than following industry practice. El Sawy believes we need to seek more creative ways to use practice to creatively inform theory in the IS area. He will suggest ways that academics can seek out innovative practices using his experience with the Society for Information Management (SIM) paper award competition. He will propose different ways of mixing academics and practitioners in structured discussions, using his experience with an industry-sponsored research center. El Sawy will argue that through structuring these interactions more judiciously, it is much more likely that the research will have an impact on solving critical, theory-driven problems.

**Bob Galliers** will argue that while we may not as yet be ready to deal with broader societal problems, we need to change our stance on this very quickly if we are to remain at all relevant. He will argue that we need to be less parochial and constrained in thinking about what is the appropriate subject matter of the information systems field, both in terms of what we consider to be the IS domain, and of what we consider to be appropriate research and research outlets. He will discuss issues of globalization and parochialism in IS research and some of the broader issues requiring our attention. Unless we are ready to embrace diversity and richness, both in terms of idea generation and research publication, we will not be poised to make a strong or significant contribution to larger societal problems. He will also address how we might structure transdisciplinary teams so that research engagements have greater impact.

**Claudia Loebbecke** adopts the position that doing significant IS research can be achieved by a portfolio project approach. A central tenet of her argument is that evaluating IS research projects by their impact on stakeholders, especially in a funded environment, can help researchers select relevant, interesting problems, approach them rigorously, and articulate significant contributions. She will specifically address projects funded by industry and the role of those projects in stimulating research in cutting-edge areas that parallel industry initiatives or are ahead of current industry practice. She will comment on the knowledge and support systems from the European academe perspective that encourages industry-funded research.

**Rick Watson** will argue that IS research needs to get closer to wealth creation rather than reporting what has happened. Wealth creation (or value creation) is defined as the outcome of someone creating a product or service that someone else consumes. To this end, he will focus on knowledge exchange issues in the IS research domain. The closer we can get to wealth creation, the more power IS scholars will have as we live in a system that is centered on wealth creation. He will address the global exchange of knowledge and present his concept for an electronic parallel of the Peace Corps. He will also discuss how senior leaders of our field can promote significant research by encouraging new types of research undertakings, mentoring junior faculty, and reforming the current incentive schemes of our academy.

## About the Panelists

**Kevin C. Desouza** authored *Managing Knowledge with Artificial Intelligence* (Quorum Books, 2002), coauthored *Managing Information in Complex Organizations* (M.E. Sharpe, 2005) and *Engaged Knowledge Management* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), and edited *New Frontiers of Knowledge Management* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2005). In addition, he has published over 100 articles in academic and practitioner journals on knowledge management, crisis management, strategic management of information systems, and government and competitive intelligence. Desouza has been an invited speaker on a number business and technology topics for industry and academic audiences. His most recent book, *The Outsourcing Handbook—How to Implement a Successful Outsourcing Process* (Kogan Page, 2006), is in press.

**Omar A. El Sawy** is a professor of Information Systems in the Information and Operations Management Department at the University of Southern California's Marshall School of Business. He is also Director of Research at the Center for Telecom

Management (CTM) at USC, an industry-sponsored research and education center focusing on the networked digital industry. His interests include redesigning electronic value chains, the design of vigilant information systems for turbulent dynamic environments, and knowledge management around business processes in fast-response contexts. El Sawy holds a Ph.D. from Stanford Business School, an MBA from the American University in Cairo, and a BSEE from Cairo University. He has lectured, consulted, and carried out research on four continents, has been an IS advisor to the United Nations Development Programme in Egypt, and a Fulbright scholar in Finland. El Sawy is the author of over 70 papers and his work has appeared in both information systems and management journals. He is the author of the book *Redesigning Enterprise Processes for e-Business*. He is a six-time winner (most recently in 2005) of SIM's Paper Award Competition.

**Claudia Loebbecke** holds the Chair of Business Administration and Media Management and is Director of the Department of Media Management at the University of Cologne, Germany. She currently serves President of the Association for Information Systems. Before joining the University of Cologne, she worked for INSEAD, McKinsey & Co., Erasmus University Rotterdam, and Copenhagen Business School. She spent her sabbatical, from October 2002 to March 2003, at INSEAD and at the Sloan School's Center for Information Systems Research at Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Loebbecke is a senior editor for *Journal of Strategic Information Systems*. She has published over 100 internationally peer-reviewed journal articles and conference papers. In 2004, she won the second prize in SIM's Paper Award Competition.

Appointed to his current post of Provost and Vice President for Academic Affairs in 2002, **Robert Galliers** came to Bentley from the London School of Economics, where he was Professor of Information Systems and Research Director in the Department of Information Systems. He retains his connection with LSE as a visiting professor. Before joining LSE, he served as Lucas Professor of Business Management Systems and Dean of Warwick Business School, and earlier as Foundation Professor and Head of the School of Information Systems at Curtin University in Australia. Galliers is editor-in-chief of *Journal of Strategic Information Systems*, and a fellow of the Royal Society of Arts, the British Computer Society and the AIS, of which he is a past president. He has published widely in many of the leading international journals on IS and has also coauthored a number of books, the most recent being *Strategic Information Management* (3<sup>rd</sup> edition, Butterworth-Heinemann, 2003), *Rethinking Management Information Systems* (Oxford University Press, 1999), and *IT and Organizational Transformation* (Wiley, 1998).

**Richard Watson** is the J. Rex Fuqua Distinguished Chair for Internet Strategy and Director of the Center for Information Systems Leadership in the Terry College of Business, the University of Georgia. He has published in leading journals in several fields as well as authored books on data management and electronic commerce. His current research focuses primarily on electronic commerce and IS leadership. He has given invited seminars for companies and universities in more than 20 countries. He is a past President of AIS and has been a visiting professor at Agder University College, and Norway, Fudan University, China, as well as a consulting editor to John Wiley & Sons. Watson has served as cochair of ICIS and as a senior editor for *MIS Quarterly*.