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EDITORIAL

Stimulating dialog between information systems research and practice

Dov Te'eni[1], Stefan Seidel[2] and Jan vom Brocke[2]

[1] Tel Aviv University, Tel-Aviv, Israel; [2] University of Liechtenstein, Vaduz, Liechtenstein

Correspondence: Dov Te'eni, Tel Aviv University, Tel-Aviv, Israel
E-mail: teeni@post.tau.ac.il
URL:

Since its inception, the editors of the *European Journal of Information Systems (EJIS)* have been determined to make it a place for interesting discussions of research about meaningful problems – discussions that will make an impact (Te'eni *et al*, 2015). We also believe that in order to make research and practice more productive, practitioners have to hear and be heard in these discussions. To this end, our editorial describes a new procedure that *EJIS* is adopting to bring practitioners into the discussion by developing and disseminating reviews of selected research articles that are tailored to the needs and the language of practitioners. Undoubtedly, there is value in diverse interactions with practice throughout the research processes, but here we advance only one limited form of interaction, namely dialog with practitioners after *EJIS* accepts a paper.

Why we need a dialog between researchers and practitioners

Although we seek to foster increased dialog between researchers and practitioners, our motivation is rooted in the more general desire of making sure that research in information systems (IS) is relevant (e.g., Benbasat & Zmud, 1999; Westfall, 1999) and impactful (Malhotra *et al*, 2013). More recent calls to relevance and impact have drawn attention to fundamental issues such as the epistemic and pragmatic scripts we use in our research (Grover & Lyytinen, 2015), the research questions we address (Rai, 2017), the criteria for publishing in top journals (Gupta, 2017), the research arrangements and settings for conducting high-impact research (Nunamaker *et al*, 2017), and our publication practices (Bichler *et al*, 2015).

Relevance and impact can be pursued in many different ways, depending on the particular research genre. As an applied field, IS *should* improve the practice of information systems, and different research approaches reflect this desire (Seidel & Watson, 2014). Those who are interested in Design Science Research, for instance, will wish to develop prescriptive knowledge that may guide the design of information systems (e.g., Gregor & Hevner, 2013; Peffers *et al*, 2007). Others may prefer to focus on explanation and prediction but highlight the practical implications of their research. Still others focus attention on addressing those problems that are of highest value to society (Malhotra *et al*, 2013; vom Brocke *et al*, 2013), or wicked problems (Nunamaker *et al*, 2017), and conduct what some may consider 'risky' research (Gupta, 2017). Perhaps the most comprehensive approach to linking research with practice is 'engaged scholarship' (Van de Ven, 2007), which is familiar to many European IS researchers. This approach calls for new forms of knowledge production that are based on substantial interaction between researchers and practitioners (and customers) that can transcend traditional dichotomies, such as rigor versus relevance, and lead to practical knowledge (Mathiassen & Nielsen, 2008). *EJIS* publishes different research approaches through a set of diverse genres (Rowe, 2012). We insist that each paper must make an impact but recognize that impact differs with the type of genre (Ågerfalk, 2014). Of course, not all contributions must have immediate practical applicability; theoretical advancements also provide a basis for developing interventions at a later stage (Seidel & Watson, 2014). That said, whatever the research genre, its message must be communicated clearly to whatever stakeholders it claims to impact.

In order for researchers to influence practice, they need to engage in dialog with practitioners. It is as simple as that. Practitioners will be able to consume our research only if they (1) know about the research, (2) understand how it can be applied, and (3) trust it. And they will only be motivated to invest time and effort in learning about our research if it immediately appears to be useful and usable, just as they will only wish to use an information system if it appears useful and useable. What may be less obvious is that our impact on practice also depends on feedback from practitioners on whether we are doing things right, and whether we are doing the right things (Rai, 2017), hence the importance of both directions in the dialog.

Challenges and enablers in dialoging between researchers and practitioners

Being able to communicate our research to practitioners – and to hear their reaction – is difficult, for several reasons. Lang (2003) describes three major problems of research to practice communication: inappropriate dissemination channels, language barriers, and the alienation of academic research from industry. First, our *major journals and conferences, those where we seek to publish, are not accessible to most practitioners*. Practitioners are used to more interactive channels tailored to their immediate needs, and indeed, more entertaining communication forums and styles.

Second, *researchers and practitioners speak different languages*. Our major journals ask for submissions in English using academic terms from extant publications or newly invented terms that look obscurely academic. On the contrary, practitioners have their own native languages, and their conversation is packed with professional terms, recent buzzwords, and acronyms that are quick to follow new technologies and the latest models. Any effort that practitioners need to make in order to translate our language to theirs means that they are less likely to communicate effectively. Moreover, differences in language mean different ways of thinking, which lead to the idea that researchers aiming to achieve practical impact begin their research by formulating their research questions in the language of practice. Other suggestions included shortening the message, simplifying the style and lightening the tone, illustrating concepts with realistic examples, telling stories, making abstract constructs and relationships more concrete, depicting findings with interesting graphics, and emphasizing practical implications and action (Benbasat & Zmud, 1999; Kavan, 1998; Rosemann & Vessey, 2008).

Third, *researchers and practitioners operate in different environments and have different worldviews*. Practitioners see our research environment as academic: that is, impractical (interestingly, each of the popular dictionaries we consulted included in their definition of 'academic' the words impractical, not practical or not useful). Our lean and abstract models seem unrealistic and inapplicable compared to what practitioners expect. The messages in practice usually include prescriptions that capture the nuances of similar situations, and can therefore be easily understood and applied to their own specific situations. A simple two-by-two matrix accompanied by practical examples of its application, for instance, might be much more useful for a practitioner than a theoretical model with high explanatory power. In other words, practitioners' initial feeling seems to be that our research is not only inaccessible (the first and second points above), but also useless and untrustworthy. Accordingly, Lang (2003) suggests that information systems researchers need to spend more time within industrial contexts and need to be rewarded for maintaining their technical skills. While we do not disagree with any of the above recommendations, we wish to build only on those that relate directly to the dialog between practitioners and researchers about published research.

To overcome these challenges, we hope to enable and motivate dialog by adjusting the *process of publishing* and by creating an *institutional setting* in which this dialog can take place. Rosemann and Vessey (2008) see the research process as a life cycle that includes five chronological stages: identification of the research problem, theoretical development, research methodology, data analysis and communication of the findings. As noted at the outset, we certainly wish to encourage engaged scholarship throughout the research process, but this particular initiative focuses mostly on communicating findings and ensuring that the research is applicable, so as to increase the relevance of future research projects (ibid.).

Our initiative for dialoging with practitioners

In order to create an effective setting for dialog, *EJIS* will offer a new way of initiating, cultivating and promoting dialog between researchers and practitioners. Although it may be tempting to think forward of a setting in which researchers and practitioners co-produce knowledge, we opted to begin operating in a more conservative setting where researchers are motivated primarily to *produce and publish knowledge* while practitioners are motivated primarily to *solve problems and apply knowledge*. This established mode of operation is congruent with the existing incentive systems and comes after considering the community's other attempts to communicate with practitioners. For instance, some journals create tailored abstracts for practitioners. *MISQ*, for example, collaborated with *SIM* (a society of practitioners in information management) to create two–three page executive summaries of research articles. A more extreme effort would be to publish entire

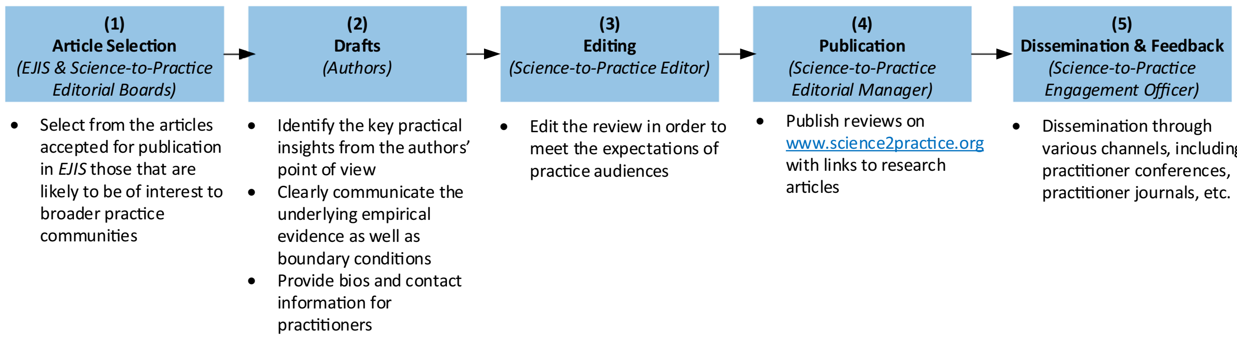

Figure 1 Science-to-practice Editorial Process.

articles, usually based on research articles written for a broad audience, such as in *MISQ Executive, MIT Sloan Management Review, Harvard Business Review,* or the *Communications of the ACM*. Unfortunately, publishing in outlets that focus on practice is not highly rewarded by the academic community (Seidel & Watson, 2014). In another attempt, the academic journal included practice-oriented papers, which were often co-authored with practitioners. Each of these directions has its strengths and weaknesses, which may differ for different audiences. All too often, however, our research does not reach IS practitioners even if it is of potential interest to them, but does not come across as such. We believe that dialog between the traditionally dichotomous audiences can bring about a better appreciation of the research precisely by intermingling their traditional roles, leading in future to more of a co-production mode that will most likely lead to even higher agreement on the value of research.

Our aim is that *EJIS* will remain an academic research journal that cooperates with a separate entity to interact with practitioners after acceptance, without changing the refereeing and development processes of manuscripts. The *OR Society*, who owns *EJIS*, has encouraged us to undertake this initiative and will be supporting us. *EJIS* is fortunate to cooperate with the Department of IS at the University of Liechtenstein to form this entity, which we shall call *science-to-practice*. Its mission will focus on communicating research findings and receiving feedback that may affect ensuing research (our draft website is http://science2practice.org/. In the future, we hope to sponsor more channels of communication throughout the research project.

How can we communicate the findings of academic research from researchers to practitioners so that they can be useful to practice, easily understood, and trustworthy? And how can we obtain the feedback we need from practice? Our solution is straightforward with two major efforts. (1) We will evaluate every accepted paper for its potential value to practitioners, and its relevant findings will be communicated in a way that focuses on what is essential, stripping away methodological, theoretical, and epistemological detail that might make the message to practitioners more difficult to understand. (2) We intend to open channels that encourage practitioners to provide feedback and engage in a dialog with those who conducted the research and other interested researchers. Accordingly, research findings should be presented in a way that help the practitioner see how to apply the research, under what conditions and what pitfalls to avoid.

Although we wish to focus on findings and on 'the essential,' we need to recognize that science has become the most successful enterprise in human history *because* of its rigorous application of scientific method. Practitioners trust science because its findings are based on empirical evidence and sound arguments. So when we communicate with practitioners, we not only need to highlight important results, but to describe the evidence that supports the conclusions as well as its boundary conditions – this will allow practitioners to conclude why they may (or may not) trust the research findings. Table 1 summarizes the content of the *science-to-practice reviews*.

The editorial and feedback process at *science-to-practice* begins after *EJIS* accepts the paper. It has the following stages: (1) empirical articles, once accepted for publication, are evaluated for their practical implications by the *EJIS* and *science-to-practice* editorial boards, (2) authors of articles that appear to be of interest to practitioners are asked to provide key information (see Table 1), (3) the authors' summaries are edited by *science-to-practice* editors to match the expectations of practice audiences, (4) *science-to-practice* reviews are published online, and (5) dialog is initiated between authors and practitioners and moderated by an *engagement officer*. It is our contention that this dialog will not only lead to feedback about research results, but will tell us something about *what it is about IS research that matters for practitioners* – and thus constitute an important element of our learning. Figure 1 gives an overview of the process.

Table 1 Key elements of science-to-practice reviews

Element	*Description*
Problem	What is the problem and why is it relevant?
Target audience	Who is the target audience in terms of, for instance: • General stakeholder groups (e.g., industry practitioners, policy makers) • Industries (e.g., manufacturing, service) • Positions (e.g., managers, software developers)?
Solution and recommendations	What are the key findings? What are the practical implications (e.g., in terms of normative/prescriptive statements, guidelines)?
Benefits	What are the potential benefits for companies applying the suggested solution/recommendations?
How it was studied	What was the research process and empirical evidence?
Boundary conditions	Under what circumstances was the study conducted? What are the boundary conditions of the findings? To what extent can it be expected that the results are generalizable, i.e., applicable across contexts and time?
Details of the scientific publication(s)	Where and when was the study/where the studies published? How can they be accessed (for each paper, there will be a link to the full paper)?
About the authors	Who conducted the study, what is their background, and why can they be trusted?

Table 2 Suggested engagement strategy

Activity	*Description*
Publication of reviews through an online platform	*Science-to-practice reviews* are published online and are openly accessible. They contain the elements described in Table 1 The platform provides a way for interested practitioners to get directly in touch with the authors The platform provides a way of stimulating online discussions on articles and findings
Social media	Key social media channels are used to raise awareness of new *science-to-practice* reviews
Practitioner conferences	The initiative – as well as selected *science-to-practice* reviews – are presented at practitioner conferences Feedback is collected and is forwarded to the authors. If appropriate, this feedback is made available to the broader academic community
Regional engagement formats and industry–practitioner relationships	The initiative is used to build new industry–practitioner relationships, both regionally and internationally
Practitioner journals and magazines	*Science-to-practice reviews* for practitioners are brought to the attention of practitioner journals and magazines
Publisher's channels	The publisher should support engagement by disseminating information about the initiative as well as pushing our *science-to-practice* reviews through all their relevant channels

Thus, actively engaging – dialoging – with practitioners is an important element of our strategy, beyond the mere editing and publication of *science-to-practice reviews*. We see different channels that are appropriate to initiate, cultivate, and improve this dialog: for instance, different social media channels, practitioner conferences, as well as practitioner journals and magazines. We will have a dedicated engagement officer who is responsible for disseminating findings and stimulating the dialog between scientists and practitioners (Table 2).

We have chosen this approach to take account of the different target groups, their intentions, and the way in which they receive incentives. Academics need to – and should – publish their research in high-quality scholarly outlets. Practitioners should be able to find the latest knowledge and developments in order to succeed in competitive markets. By (1) establishing a service to 'translate' the findings of selected academic articles into a language that is meaningful for a relevant target group in practice and (2) actively engaging with practitioners, we hope to serve both groups at the same time.

Concluding remarks

Our primary mission as a research journal is to promote dialog within the community of IS researchers, yet we cannot shrug off the need to extend the dialog to include practitioners. We need to have dialog with practitioners so that our research can impact the practice of IS, and we need to understand from practitioners what aspects of research matter to them, and how far researchers in the field are actually working on problems that matter. We should hasten to develop a measure of success for science-to-practice and, more generally, model research acceptance by practitioners. Our initiative itself will surely develop and morph as we learn more from practice, but we are confident that eventually it will help to create better dialog about IS with stakeholders across industries and sectors, including users, IT and business professionals, CIOs and journalists, so that they think and act at the individual, organizational and societal levels. We also hope to see complementary efforts at dialog throughout the research life cycle that will have to interact with the journal's operations at earlier stages. We believe strongly that it is through a meaningful engagement in the form of a vivid and continuous dialog between researchers and practitioners that our field will come to full potential.

This issue

This is a special issue on security and privacy, which is introduced insightfully by the special editors. Indeed, we thank and congratulate the three editors of the special issue *Paul Benjamin Lowry*, *Tamara Dinev* and *Robert Willison*. They, together with the reviewers and of course the authors, deserve to be commended for an important and timely collection of papers that will surely make their mark, academically and practically too.

Acknowledgements

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