

# 19 PRACTICAL AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS: VALUABLE AIDS OR SEDUCTIVE TRAPS

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The call for contributions states that the focus of the conference is on making “theory practical.” The objective is “to present practical and theoretical frameworks that may explore the many-faceted nature of IS/IT-related change.” One of the goals is to try to “integrate” a “very fragmented field.”

The contribution of this panel is to debate the advantages and limitations of such integrating frameworks and whether such frameworks are useful or a seductive trap (cf. Doyle 1991). The panelists will discuss and debate the value of practical and theoretical

frameworks within information systems and especially as they relate to IS/IT-related change.

Michael Myers will chair and moderate the panel. He will briefly introduce the topic and the panelists.

Dan Robey will follow. He will argue that theory is potentially of much value to practitioners. Theory is a way of organizing and simplifying experience, and conceptual clarity can be tremendously sharpened by a theory that resonates with experience. However, simple theories and simple frameworks can be dangerous guides to practice, and complex theories will probably be ignored or misunderstood. A useful theory strikes a balance between being simple and complex.

Dan will make two recommendations for shaping theory to the requirements of practice. First, IS researchers should abandon deterministic theories because they are too simplistic. Second, IS researchers should remember that research will have useful implications for practitioners if the theory used to guide the research contains “action levers.” Action levers are factors that decision-makers can influence through direct action, example, or policy.

Chris Sauer will argue that theory is actually of little value to practitioners. Academic researchers in IS have too often unquestioningly adopted the belief that “there is nothing so practical as a good theory.” This is a belief that owes much to a “natural sciences” model of knowledge where often, though not always, a theory that explains how things are thereby helps us understand how to change the way they are. This model does not apply satisfactorily to our field of study for two reasons. First, social phenomena are not readily theorized in this way. Second, in the world of IS, how things are changes so rapidly that even if we had good theories they would be outdated before completion.

Chris will argue that rather than adhering to the “natural science” based belief in a tight link between theory and practice, it would be more pragmatic to accept a much looser link. He proposes that developing practical frameworks is a sufficiently different task from developing theory that we should not expect both to be achieved within the same research paper, and possibly not even by the same researchers. It is no surprise that few theorists expend serious effort on the practical implications sections of their papers. Practical frameworks require deep understanding of the values and pressures that characterize the practitioner’s world. The role of theory, inevitably tentative and partial, is to feed insight into practical frameworks, but we should not expect theory either to substitute for practical frameworks or to dominate their development.

Geoff Walsham will argue that practical and theoretical frameworks can be a seductive trap if used as panaceas or blinkers, but may be valuable if appropriated with contextual sensitivity and reflexivity. For example, design methodologies and strategy frameworks offer practitioner-oriented approaches that may provide helpful structuring devices, but can be dangerous if applied in a mechanistic or acontextual way. Theoretical frameworks such as actor-network theory or structuration theory can be valuable sensitizing devices for the researcher, or practitioner, but they clearly do not provide simple prescriptive guides to action, and there remains a challenge for academics to make the conceptual ideas and insights in these theories more accessible to thoughtful practitioners.

Michael Myers, the panel chair, will conclude by briefly commenting on each presentation, highlighting the main areas of debate. He will then facilitate an open

discussion inviting the audience to participate in what promises to be a stimulating and lively discussion.

### References

Doyle, J. R. "Problems with Strategic Information Systems Frameworks," *European Journal of Information Systems* (1:4), 1991, pp. 273-280.

### About the Panelists

**Michael D. Myers** is Associate Professor in the Department of Management Science and Information Systems at the University of Auckland, New Zealand. He is Editor of the *ISWorld Section on Qualitative Research*, an Associate Editor of *Information Systems Journal*, and an Associate Editor of *MIS Quarterly*. His research interests are in the area of information systems development, qualitative research methods in information systems, and the social and organizational aspects of information technology.

**Daniel Robey** holds a joint appointment as Professor in the Departments of Computer Information Systems and Management at Georgia State University. He teaches courses in Business Process Redesign, Organizational Design, Qualitative Research Methods, and the Management of Information Technology. His current research deals with the consequences of information systems in organizations and the processes of system development and implementation. This research includes empirical examinations of information systems development work and of the effects of a wide range of technologies on organizational structure and patterns of work. It also includes the development of theoretical approaches to explaining the development and consequences of information technology in organizations.

**Christopher Sauer** is Senior Research Fellow in the Fujitsu Centre at the Australian Graduate School of Management. He is Asia-Pacific Editor of the *Journal of Strategic Information Systems* and is a member of the editorial boards of the *Information Systems Journal* and the *Australian Journal of Management*. Research interests include the management of IT, IT implementation risk, the management of project management in organizations, and transfer, diffusion and adoption of IT. His book, co-authored with Philip Yetton, entitled *Steps to the Future: Fresh Thinking in the Management of IT-Based Organizational Transformation*, was published in 1997.

**Geoff Walsham** is a Research Professor of Management Studies at the Judge Institute of Management Studies, Cambridge University, UK. His last post was as Professor of Information Management at Lancaster University, UK, but he returned to Cambridge in 1996, where he had previously worked for 19 years in the Management Studies Group of the Engineering Department. His teaching and research is centered on the development, use and management of computer-based information systems, and the relationship of these systems to changes in organizations and societies. He is particularly interested in the human consequences of computerization in a global context, including both industrialized and developing countries. His publications include *Interpreting Information Systems in Organizations* (Wiley 1993) and *Information Technology and Changes in Organizational Work* (edited with Orlikowski, Jones, and DeGross, Chapman & Hall, 1996).

