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Senior Editor Perspectives

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Senior Editor Perspectives

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Introduction

My term as Senior Editor of *Information Systems Research (ISR)* finishes in December 2017. Serving as a senior editor has been an honor and an exhilarating experience for me. *ISR* has made tremendous strides in strengthening its position as a premier business school academic journal that is widely recognized for the high-quality scholarship it publishes. Current and past editorial boards truly have a lot to be proud of in shaping the journal and the information systems field. Most interesting business problems today (and in the near future) lie at the intersection of business and information technology, precisely the domain for *ISR*. We are fortunate as an academic community to have many interesting and impactful problems to work on.

Alok Gupta, editor-in-chief (EIC) of *ISR*, asked me to write a few words of advice for authors. In the years that I have been an author, a reviewer, an associate editor, and a senior editor at *ISR*, I have witnessed many papers accepted for publication and many more regretfully rejected. I do not presume to be qualified to provide advice, but reflecting on the many papers over the years, perhaps I can distill some of the wisdom of the academic community so that authors can learn vicariously through what I have observed. Of course, these may not reflect the editorial views of other editors and the journal. In addition, I handled many empirical papers during my tenure, and the opinions below perhaps pertain more to empirical papers than to those that are analytical, qualitative, or design science in nature.

Developing an “Elevator Pitch”

We advise our students to develop an “elevator pitch” or a short narrative for prospective employers or venture capitalists. However, we often do not follow our own advice.

We—job seekers, entrepreneurs, authors—all have a limited amount of time to make a great first impression and first impressions matter. As authors, you are “selling” your research to a discerning group of reviewers and editors. Make their job easy. Can you precisely describe what you have done and why it is important

in just a few sentences, perhaps a short paragraph? The shorter the better! Imagine that you are describing your research *verbally* to a reviewer—what do you want them to remember about your research?

As a mental exercise even before you start writing the paper, it focuses your attention on the core contribution. When I read a paper, I create one for myself, if the authors have not done it for me. If I cannot, it does not bode well. Anecdotally, papers with a short and precise “elevator pitch” have an easier path through the review process (although I have no empirical evidence with perfect identification to support my claim).

As a narrative device as you write the paper, it provides clarity. Include the “elevator pitch” in some form early in the paper and definitely in the introduction. It draws the reviewer in, piques her interest, and focuses attention on the core contribution. If you cannot distill the paper into a short narrative, perhaps the paper is unfocused and diffused. Try it out with a colleague. If it does not resonate with her, perhaps you need to change the message.

Depth vs. Breadth

Rejection for “lack of contribution” is frustrating for authors. To preempt this comment, authors often try a shotgun approach. They expand the scope of the paper to include hypotheses that are only tangentially related to their core story, hoping that the additional hypotheses and analysis will add heft to the paper. I believe that this is a wrong strategy. Wide shotguns make the paper unfocused and make a cogent story elusive. They open up other areas of criticism for reviewers that are unnecessary, and criticism of these tangential areas can cast the paper in a negative light—reviewers focus on the parts they do not like rather than on those that they do.

A single research paper is about depth—answering a precise research question thoroughly—and not about breadth. With the page limits of *ISR* and other major journals, you cannot do justice to a large number of hypotheses, concepts, and ideas in a single paper in a way that reviewers will find acceptable. Furthermore,

reviewers (and authors) lose focus and interest as you develop the arguments for disparate hypotheses, discuss your data and empirical strategy, and present the empirical analysis and results. I realize this is a balancing act, but err on the side of depth versus breadth, and thoroughly investigate a very specific research question.

Building on a Conversation

Another frustrating experience for authors is to have their paper rejected for a “lack of fit” with *ISR*. But, what exactly is “fit” with *ISR*?

The *ISR* editorial statement says that the journal “seeks to advance knowledge about the effective and efficient utilization of information technology by individuals, groups, organizations, society and nations for the improvement of economic and social welfare.” The statement is broad and inclusive, but does emphasize the centrality of IT. In his first editorial as EIC on “What and How *ISR* Publishes,” Alok Gupta (Gupta 2017) goes further to say that even the “centrality of the IS/IT artefact is perhaps not the only important factor.”

The *ISR* editorial board includes scholars with a wide variety of domain and methodology expertise. A study of diversity in IS research finds that information systems is a polycentric field where “researchers depend on strong relationship with others for reputation and resources, while conceptual coherence in the field is low” (Burgess et al. 2017). Thus, IS journals (including *ISR*) do publish a wide variety of articles encompassing multiple domains and methodologies. So, how should authors preempt “lack of fit” criticisms?

Fundamentally, research builds knowledge through ongoing conversations among scholars in a discipline. There are many diverse conversations reflected in the journal pages of *ISR* and *MIS Quarterly*—do reviews drive sales, does IT improve productivity, how does social influence affect adoption in online environments, and many, many more. A fruitful approach to address the “lack of fit” criticism is to tie the paper to an ongoing conversation among IS scholars.

With the diversity of existing conversations, this should not be a difficult task, but authors often do not put in adequate effort. If you cannot find such a conversation, make a strong case about why such a conversation is important for IS scholars. If you find that you cannot tie the paper to an existing conversation or make a strong case for a new conversation, perhaps it is time for you to evaluate fit with *ISR*. Building on an ongoing conversation, or starting a new and relevant conversation, will also help reviewers clearly understand your contributions.

Empirical Choices

In any empirical research, authors have to make choices about methods, parameters, and empirical strategy. There are no perfect measures, no models without assumptions, and no techniques without compromises. It is legitimate for reviewers to question whether the results will hold under alternative specifications.

Authors sometimes throw the proverbial “kitchen sink” at the problem with multiple methods and alternative parameter values. There are at least two problems with this approach—reviewers are unsure what the correct specification is and how to interpret the results when they are not all consistent. A better approach is to present your main results and convincingly justify your choice of parameters and methods. You can then think carefully and deeply about the sources of bias and uncertainty in your primary results, explain why the additional robustness analysis you present address these concerns, and interpret the difference in results if any. Reviewers typically appreciate the robustness checks, but they need to understand the problems you are trying to address through the additional analysis.

Final Thoughts

I do not have the temerity to give advice to my colleagues on the editorial board of *ISR*, but I do want to close with a lingering concern.

ISR established itself as a premier journal that is widely recognized by scholars in other business school disciplines because of the high-quality scholarship it publishes. *ISR* achieved this status while being open to research in diverse domains and reflecting diverse methodologies. As Alok Gupta says in his inaugural editorial as EIC (Gupta 2017), IS researchers “pose new questions about old beliefs due to technological advances in IS/IT.” Now, almost every domain is disrupted by IS/IT and scholars in those other domains are also interested in exploring the same questions in the new context. Thus, it is no surprise that many of the papers published in *ISR* could also have been published by premier journals in other disciplines such as strategy, marketing, economics, finance, and computer science. Because IS/IT is embedded in every domain, the diversity of conversations on the pages of *ISR* is also vast, ranging from healthcare, social media, and government to cybersecurity, software development, and intelligent systems.

That diversity, however, brings up two challenges.

First, how can we make *ISR* the “go-to” journal for those conversations for the broader research community, especially when the primary conversations are by researchers outside IS?

Second, as we explore new domains affected by IS/IT, how can we develop the review infrastructure to

continue the tradition of excellence in *ISR* in those new domains?

I alone do not have the answers. In parting, I leave it to the editors and readers to think about these challenges and how we as a community can rise to address them.

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