Chapter 9
Living on the Edge:
Balancing Rigor and Relevance Within an Action Research Context

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ABSTRACT

This chapter describes the efforts in ensuring research relevance by means of an industrial PhD project. The project is aiming at strengthening the relevance of research and development by educating scientists with an insight into the practical aspects of research and development and by developing networks in which knowledge can be effectively disseminated between industry and university. The project is taking its stand with an empirical and industrial centre with a technical solution called Dynamo, which is delivered by the company Logica. Dynamo, an intelligent portal that seamlessly connects systems, user information, roles and rule sets, and its context will provide a rich and useful empirical source from which to launch the action research process. The project contains two distinct stakeholders–industry and academy–jointly guiding the project and making sure that both worlds get a result that is in line with and contributes to their business. To this end two key stakeholders that have taken on the role as gatekeepers of rigor and relevance respectively. Taking position in the middle of the action is the PhD student who, by living the life of both researcher and consultant, will take on the role of balancing rigor and relevance. The chosen research approach together with the complex implementation context makes it crucial to take on an open minded selection.

INTRODUCTION

During the last twenty years, we have seen how organization paradigms with a focus on stability, hierarchy and clear boundaries have been overshadowed by newer paradigms, which argue that "modern" organizations are characterized by horizontal decision-making, flexibility, agility and resilience (Ciborra, 1996; Holmström & Boudreau, 2006; Lengnick-Hall, 2003). These changes are reflected in a rich body of academic research and have, not surprisingly, gained a similar attention by organi-

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zational managers. Perhaps as no surprise then, the relationship between research and practice has been a subject for continuous debate within IS research (e.g. Lindgren et al, 2004; Truex et al 2006). Performing good research in the IS field has been focused on rigor rather than relevance, effectively turning the relevance of research projects into a marginal issue (for a discussion see Lyytinen/King, 2006). In the context of industrial settings this is evident, as research in such context ideally should be high on rigor as well as on relevance (e.g. Jonsson et al, 2008; Westergren & Holmström, 2008). This paper presents the outline of an industrial PhD project that is taking on an action research approach which holds promises for research being rigorous as well as relevant.

RELEVANCE LOST?

To be able to prosper as academics, IS researchers have to follow established set of norms to publish research for their peers (e.g. for an academic audience). To publish in peer-reviewed journals and create the type of research output recognized as a standard "scientific article," academic researchers must report research in a style that conforms to a widely accepted set of standards. This involves the use of a particular rhetoric, structure, and writing style. Such a standard may contribute to the perception among practitioners that much academic research is difficult to read and irrelevant for practice. For the academic audience, however, these same characteristics are indicators of the rigor of the research.

AR has been identified as a particularly promising approach in relation to the ways in which it addresses relevance (Susman and Evered, 1978). Susman and Evered (1978) view a general AR project as a cyclical process carried out through the AR cycle, comprising five stages: diagnosing, action planning, action taking, evaluating, and specifying learning. The diagnosing stage involves the identification and definition of an improvement opportunity or a general problem to be solved in the client organization. The action planning stage involves the consideration of alternative courses of action to solve the problem identified. The action taking stage involves the selection/realization of one of the courses of action outlined in the previous stage. The evaluating stage involves the study of the actual outcomes of the selected course of action. The specifying learning stage, finally, involves the study of the outcomes of the evaluating stage. The first author is an industrial PhD student and also an employee at the firm developing and deploying Dynamo. To this end, we were in a good position to pursue the case as an action research case where the knowing part is closely associated with the doing part.

EMPIRICAL SETTING

The empirical setting for the research project is placed around a solution called Dynamo. Dynamo is a portal that handles administrative processes such as roles and authorization. Although potent to manage all sorts of identity sources, Dynamo is mainly targeted at different kind of catalogues. As an intelligent portal that seamlessly connects systems, user information, roles and rule sets, Dynamo makes it possible for the organization using it to take advantage of relevant and always updated information across business processes and connected systems.

With powerful functions that provide single point of administration for all connected systems, Dynamo offers an integration of identity information from various systems into one common interface. Dynamo facilitates an identity management platform enabling administrative functions for all systems in one place as well as access control to domain resources provided with a comprehensive authority system. Administrators can easily find information about users and resources and work in a distributed manner.