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LSE Information Systems Research Forum panel speech by Aleksi Aaltonen

Technology entrepreneurship and IS

When I was an entrepreneur, did I ever look for an answer to a problem in my work from an IS journal? The answer is *never*.

My experience is that most of IS scholarship is completely irrelevant to entrepreneurial action – at least for the kind of entrepreneurship that I was involved in. IS has been historically interested in large corporations and their system, which is an antithesis to how you do things in a startup. Getting things done, agility and focus on the absolutely necessary rule, whereas in big corporations such things get lost in the morass of meetings, roles, rules, procedures, committees, regulations, etc.

Whether this is a problem depends on your perspective. Most people here probably think it is not a major problem. I believe it is. This is not because I think IS should study cool topics or that we should be more managerially relevant. The reason is that the subject matter of IS is changing. Hanging on to big enterprise and government systems is not enough if we are to understand the role of digital technology in society.

Large organizations and their system still play an extremely important role in the corporate world, yet they are not anymore the only – and would say primary – place where new technologies are created. Much of technological innovation happens in entrepreneurial ecosystems from which they are picked up by consumers and progressive corporations. The desperate need to cope with social media is a good example. If we only look at big business and government IT, we will be late to understand where new technologies are taking us.

If we stick to the traditional IS domain of enterprise and government systems we will face an increasing challenge from those who offer their services to optimize the use of technology in organizations. Indeed, while there is an ongoing debate if and how IS can become an established reference discipline itself, there is also the risk of becoming the Kuhnian *normal science* aiming at incremental contributions to what we already know. Can we compete with domain economists in such a competition?

Personally, I would rather see IS moving strategically to study phenomena that domain economists and sociologists cannot cope with. In this sense, we should leave business value of IT, technology acceptance and all that horribly boring stuff to others and move on to do something more interesting. One, although certainly not the only way to do this would be to engage the world of technology entrepreneurship more thoroughly as it would give us better grasp on where digital technology is going today. For instance, while most of the IS community is still enthralled by big data, trends such as robotics, the internet of things and, more generally, new ways to mesh software and hardware, bits and atoms are still to catch the attention of the discipline.