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Editorial

In May 2000 the technology slide began but at that time nobody knew how long it would continue nor how severe it might be. More than a year on, the end is still not in sight. However, while our powers of foresight are unchanged, we do have more perspective on what has happened. The purpose of this Editorial is to take stock of where we are now, asking the question:

What has changed in terms of the topics, issues and problems to be studied?

In the September Editorial last year we remarked on the risk/return trade-off in relation to researching fashionable trends as opposed to enduring topics. Now is an appropriate time to review IS fashions.

Plainly, pure-play dot.coms have done their dash. While Amazon and e-bay remain as continually fascinating, evolving firms, the majority of start-ups have burnt their cash and died. We have been reminded yet again of the difficulty of finding new, easy ways to make money. Web technology is no more magic than any other innovation. Dot.coms remain interesting to researchers on three grounds: (1) historical, (2) for the innovations they brought, (3) because they might make a come-back. A come-back is only imaginable if structural change in the economy removes some of the barriers to dot.com success. Such changes would include the creation of supply chain services that could deliver physical product at economic prices. Some would argue that another major change required is improved Net security. That is, it will require legislative attention to reduce the perceived risk in doing business on the Net. If the prospect of a come-back seems plausible then some historical study is warranted. On the whole, though, we would prefer to encourage research on dot.com innovations such as increased information provision to customers, increased knowledge of customer preferences, product search agents and the like. These can be used by the established firms that are now building their Net presence more solidly.

The move to the Net by large, established, brand-name companies continues to be a major source of innovation, albeit less flashy than the dot.coms. It should be treated as an evolving experiment since it is still far from clear that many, or any, have yet got the formula right. However, it is interesting to observe the learning that is occurring. A case in point is the Australian department store retailer, David Jones. In an article in this journal in December 1999, Chris Sauer and Sue Burton wrote about the company's initial, aborted experiment in e-tailing. Today, David Jones is back on the Net with its site showing through its customer targeting that it has understood the lessons of its first excursion. Whether it or Tesco's home delivery service, say, will still be with us in a year's time is far from clear. On the other hand, we can be confident that Web-based financial services and travel services will survive. The risk/return trade-off for researchers is present even here.

Internet marketplaces are a fascinating phenomenon. After a bandwagon effect saw a proliferation of start-ups funded by consortia, often of the least predictable bedfellows, we have seen both consolidation and in some cases stasis. 'Conventional' wisdom, such as it has been, has changed almost daily. Marketplaces have been low transaction cost trading venues, price setting mechanisms, aggregators, value-adders, horizontal, and vertical; now, even meta-markets have emerged. Typically they have been slow to trade in volume. Establishing the company, the services, securing the customers and suppliers, and establishing the governance structure have all been harder than expected. For a researcher, it is expensive and difficult to keep up with all this change. The pay-off is that if you are still there when the music stops you will be far better positioned to undertake research than those who have not kept up. But, the risk remains that marketplaces could dwindle into a niche space rather than being, as initially promoted, a core structural innovation.

Finally, we should consider mobile-commerce. A year ago it was set to be the next wave. Today lower market confidence combined with the indebtedness of the telcos means that progress in developing the infrastructure for 3-G devices has slowed. Add to this the unenthusiastic response of consumers to WAP-enabled services and the outlook for the researcher in this domain is less exciting. It is worth investing time and effort but the applications that should be studied are less clear. So it will be longer in its pay-off and the risks of going up a blind alley are higher.

Against this background, this issue reminds us of the value of continuing to study enduring issues. Levy, Powell and Yetton address the SME sector, offering an empirically-based model to help researchers and business executives with the technology investment challenge. This is timely work, not merely because SMEs have received so little focused attention from

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leading researchers, but also because software companies are beginning to target them as their next potential growth area. As SME investment grows, it will be increasingly valuable to us all to have available frameworks such as this.

Veiga, Floyd and Dechant advance our thinking on IS adoption in the global context. They methodically explore the cultural issues affecting the Technology Acceptance Model. In a world where enterprise systems are increasingly rolled out across sites in many countries, their work is a salutary reminder that information systems attempt to influence behaviour and the relevant behaviours are often culture-dependent. This paper should be a reference point for much future research on global adoption and cross-cultural implementation.

Low and Aitken do the field a favour by addressing an important but unresearched area – the design of networks. Given the central role of networks to all modern technology infrastructure, this omission is serious. It may help explain why so many technology platforms are highly fragmented and why network architects enjoy almost occult status in the IS profession. This article offers a methodology for network design. It should be included in all first courses on system development and architecture.

DeSanctis and Price offer a rich case study for use in teaching. International Multifoods has many interesting characteristics for exploration in class. It is a classic study of the day-to-day management problems that companies experience when they have limited background in IT management. Students find it recognizably realistic. The strategy context and lack of alignment shine through. There is an international as well as a parent-subsidiary dimension. There is also an opportunity to think about crisis management. Having used the case ourselves, we can thoroughly recommend it to readers. Teaching notes are available from Gerry deSanctis.

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