THE MANAGEMENT INFORMATION SYSTEMS RESEARCH CENTER
AT THE UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA: A SUPPORT MECHANISM

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ABSTRACT

The Management Information Systems Research Center at the University of Minnesota is described in terms of its background, functions, and activities. Stress is placed on how the research center serves as a support mechanism for MIS faculty research at the University of Minnesota.

Background

The Management Information Systems Research Center (MISRC) at the University of Minnesota was founded in 1968, the first center of its type in the world. The concept on which the MISRC was based, a partnership between local industry and the university, is still active today. Typically firms headquartered in the Minneapolis/St. Paul area interact with the university in a variety of ways. The MISRC, during its 20 years of operation, has had three directors, Gordon Davis, Gary Dickson, and, for the past ten years, James Wetherbe. Although the number has varied over the years, approximately 20 organizations have been "Associates" of the MISRC. Currently, these organizations provide approximately $150,000 annually to fund the operation of the center. Over the years, very little financial support has been provided to the MISRC by the University of Minnesota or the Carlson School of Management other than part time course release for the person serving as director of the center and by providing high quality office space for MISRC personnel.

Function

The MISRC, in contrast with other major information systems research centers such as the Center for Information Systems Research (CISR) at MIT, does not (and never has) maintain any permanent research staff. The only permanent center staff are two administrative/clerical persons and two part time graduate assistants. Note here an important fact, the MISRC does not do research! Rather, as will be seen, the MISRC serves as a support mechanism for research conducted by faculty and doctoral students who are part of the information systems area at the University of Minnesota. Other than the research support mechanisms which will be described later, what does the MISRC do?

Activities

Obviously, there is a quid pro quo for the $7500 annual fee that organizations pay to be MISRC associates. A good deal of the time and effort of MISRC is devoted to maintaining a healthy relationship between these organizations and the research center. One of the major activities of the center is to provide funding organizations with a very high quality speakers program. About eight major programs are run during the academic year. Typically these are half day affairs usually including a luncheon. The program is free to personnel from Associate firms but the
The cost of the meal is not included (the MISRC does cover this cost for staff, students, and faculty). Many of the speakers are nationally known and are brought in from outside the local area. Travel, lodging, and honoraria are paid by the MISRC. Usually about 25% of the programs feature Minnesota faculty. Frequently the speakers appear at the MIS doctoral student and faculty research workshops in the afternoon of the day they speak to Associate firm personnel in the morning.

Maintaining the speaker program is very time consuming. Each year, a planning committee made up of persons from Associate companies defines important topics and this group plus the MISRC staff locate visible, quality speakers to deal with the topics. On average, about 100 persons from Associate companies attend these programs. Some programs attract 200 to 250 attendees, but this is rare.

A second function of the MISRC in supporting interaction with its financial supporters is to coordinate a set of special interest groups on topics of interest to Associate organizations. Topics are selected in association with the Associate firms and a mechanism is in place to find persons in all the firms that may be interested in the topics. In addition, faculty and doctoral interests are profiled, and the MISRC coordinates meetings and activities among the persons working on the several topics. Usually there are about six or seven special interest groups of various sizes (from 10 to 20) that start the year working on the topic. Each group approaches their topic differently. Some groups dissolve after one or two meetings whereas others go on meeting for the entire year. On occasion, a group will carry out a study and publish its results for dissemination to the Associate group.

Another thing the MISRC does is attempt to support the match between MBA students majoring in MIS and Associate organizations with hiring needs. Each year, one meeting is hosted by the MISRC for students in the job market and Associate firm personnel. Student resumes are also circulated by the MISRC.

All these activities and expenditures are in support of maintaining a relationship with local organizations. Much of the budget goes to support this relationship with very little left over to fund any actual MIS research. There are, however, a number of things that the MISRC does to support MIS faculty and doctoral student research.

MISRC Research Support: What Is and Is Not Done

As noted above, other than conducting a few surveys, the MISRC does not conduct research itself. The prime function of the center is to support research. This is done in several ways:

As a research broker: The MISRC will try to find sites or subjects in Associate firms for an MIS faculty member or doctoral student who needs these in association with planned research.

As a banker: If a faculty member raises funds from outside sources, the MISRC will hold and disperse these funds.

Working Paper Series: If an MIS faculty member has written a paper, the MISRC will print it in reduced size and with an attractive cover for distribution before it may be published in journal article form. There is a cost charged to "outsiders" for MISRC Working Papers. Note that the MISRC does not assist in the clerical preparation of the papers, the paper must be delivered by the writer in proper form. Only printing and binding are supported. Over 200 such papers have been published since the center began operation.

Houses the MIS Quarterly: This is a very indirect method of supporting research. Physically the offices of the MIS Quarterly are housed in center and a staff of two is
maintained to support this activity. No MISRC funds are allocated to the journal, all funds come from subscriptions and the Society for Information Management. The MISRC is the publisher of the journal, but the editorial responsibility resides elsewhere. In truth, the MIS faculty at the University of Minnesota are supported by this activity at same the level as MIS faculty elsewhere are supported.

Provides Faculty Financial Support:
One of the more unique ways the MISRC supports the MIS faculty is a "Line of Credit" program. Any MIS faculty member can request up to $2500 to be spent for any purpose. The way the faculty member pays back the "loan" is by publishing. Journals have different "pay back" levels from $100 to $500 per article. No distinction is made for co-authored work. The way the system works, it is not possible to accumulate more than $2500 at any time.

Having said what the MISRC does to support MIS faculty research at the University of Minnesota, it is worth considering some of the things that it does not do. First, as stated, the MISRC does not conduct research itself.

Second, the MISRC does not have a research strategy or research paradigm. The research that MIS faculty at the University of Minnesota do is determined to a very large degree by individual interests and talents. The MISRC does not attempt to focus faculty research directions or research methods. This approach, coupled with the fact that the MISRC does not have a research staff means that, in contrast with other MIS research centers, the Minnesota research is not concentrated in one or two areas. Scanning the titles of MISRC working papers would indicate technical research, behavioral research, and managerial research. Methods run from framework building to field studies, to experiments.

Third, the MISRC does not seek nor support seeking of outside research grants. This activity is the responsibility of individual faculty. The MISRC may lend its name to such activity, but does not actively engage in it.

Thus, in summary, the MISRC is a support mechanism for MIS research by the faculty and doctoral students in MIS at the University of Minnesota. A faculty member can have as much association with the research center or as little as suits their individual needs.