

M.Sc in Management Sciences and Operations Research

Project: What are the differences between theory and practice in OR?



Sponsor: Internal

Supervisor: Andrew Martin

Background:

The reflective practitioner and the student have much to gain from the complementary contributions of theory and practice; yet the worlds of theory and practice can sometimes seem far apart. Academics and practitioners have little opportunity to cross paths between their respective worlds. Theory can be offputting to practitioners by appearing to dismiss the everyday issues that face them, whilst at other times over-conceptualising the 'obvious'. Martin (2004) recently brings together a selection of literature to discuss this issue with particular reference to IT project design. The paper conjectures that one particular problem may be that local pragmatic factors, whilst they may be important in a given practical situation, do not exhibit a sufficiently coherent and consistent influence on the phenomenon being researched to be reflected in, say, a theoretical causal model. He starts to classify the nature of 'pragmatic' factors into political, economic, socio-cultural, technological, legal and environmental factors as well management style – a list that relates to contingency theory. These ideas need testing and refining against a wider literature, other disciplines or issues and especially with people working in the worlds of theory and practice.

This project therefore includes the following tasks:

1. Take one or more topic from any or all of IS, OR and other areas of management (perhaps that is of current theoretical and practical interest).
2. Develop a methodology to investigate the topic(s). This is likely to include developing and undertaking interviews with a range of academics and practitioners to directly elicit their views and experiences of the divide between theory and practice. These should include academics, novice practitioners, experienced practitioners and consultants. It will also require an examination of the literature in the area(s).
3. Possibly, investigate
 - a) the literature that addresses the general topic of contingency theory
 - b) the general research methods literature that addresses the topic of theory, practice and analysis of varianceAssess the extent to which these sources interpret 'pragmatic influences'; list the common pragmatic influences that they identify.

Pre-requisite skills and outlook

By undertaking this project, the student will extend their literature search and primary research skills, and develop a critical appreciation of the complementary roles of theory and practice.

- Interest in the tensions between theory and practice
- Inter-personal communication, knowledge -gathering and literature research skills
- Initiative and resilience to identify and follow up suitable respondents

Reference

Martin, A. Addressing the Gap between Theory and Practice: IT project design. The Journal of Information Technology Theory and Application (JITTA), 6:2, 2004, 23-4.