

Bridging the Pacific

by

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The Association of Management has played an instrumental role in bridging the gap between research and practice in America. With scholars venturing beyond their ivory towers and practitioners critically reflecting on their work, there has been increasing synergy between the two groups. As a result, academic theories and discoveries are becoming more relevant to real-world management practice even as our collective knowledge grows at an unprecedented pace.

This focus issue initiates a new bridging role for the Association. The aim is to surmount geographical barriers, and to become a catalyst for a truly global management community. This publication leverages many previous efforts to synthesize and improve international research and practice. By bridging the Pacific Ocean, our largely American readership will become more familiar with an assortment of information systems (IS) management issues from an Asian perspective.

From Introspection to Interdependence

In the past, local and national socioeconomic activities were predominant. Introspection was the norm, with knowledge and awareness of events beyond one's own country seldom necessary and certainly difficult to obtain. However, Marshall McLuhan (1960) was among those telling us that this would rapidly change. Indeed the information age has created the global village. Our planet has been figuratively compressed, with growing interdependencies among people from different cultures and homelands.

As our collective consciousness of a unitary world is intensified, there are substantial changes in the way business is conducted. Firms now compete for both resources and markets on a global basis while potential customers compare and choose products and services across countries and continents. Meanwhile, resource suppliers and their potential clients evaluate each other using increasingly common sets of criteria. The General Agreement on Trade and Tariffs (GATT) and the growing acceptance of the ISO 9000 quality standards are but two examples of this trend.

Information technology (IT) has been largely responsible for more porous social boundaries and the breakdown of many geographical and political barriers. Today, whether living in the Americas, Europe or Asia, we have continual

access to an assortment of real-time financial data and news services. Many of us also use global electronic networks, such as the Internet, to interact with our professional colleagues on the far side of the planet. Letters that spend days or even weeks in transit have been replaced by near-instantaneous means of communications.

As our economic and social relations become more international in scope and frequent in nature, it is important to have a broader understanding of the global circumstance, complete with its cultural contingencies. We must have a greater awareness of, and openness to cultures other than our own. With the dramatic growth of economic and cultural links between North America and Asia (see Martinsons, 1994), it is only natural to seek a more comprehensive understanding of *foreign* social and business practices.

Dynamic Developments in Asia

Such an intellectual curiosity prompted my move to Asia. As a native North American with cultural ties to Northeastern Europe, my desire to gain first-hand knowledge about Hong Kong could be considered a little peculiar. Fortunately, I now find myself in the heart of the world's most dynamic region — an ideal venue for researching socioeconomic change, organizational development, cross-cultural management and technological assimilation.

Much of the Asia-Pacific region has been undergoing rapid development even as economic growth in many Western nations has stagnated. During 1990-93, the world economy grew at less than 1 percent per year while the East Asian economies expanded at an annual rate of over 7 percent. Such robust growth will likely be sustained in many parts of Asia, by effectively capitalizing on local resources and international complementarities.

Several decades ago, Japan became the first Asian country to emerge as a major economic and technological force. It continues to have a paramount role in the Asia-Pacific region. Shortly afterwards, four smaller Asian dragons — Hong Kong, Singapore, South Korea and Taiwan — leveraged their post-Confucian systems to follow in the Japanese footsteps. Now, another wave of economies, notably including Malaysia, Thailand and Indonesia, are making rapid industrial and commercial strides.

However, the most globally significant developments are now taking place in China and India. The world's two most populous nations (with a combined total of 2 billion residents), are on the verge of an economic take-off. Although the ultimate impact of their development is subject to great debate, a transformation of the international economic order is inevitable. With the region's historically unprecedented growth, it would be foolhardy for either business practitioners or management scholars to ignore Asian events and issues.

The First Focus on Asia

Many of the dramatic and massive changes taking place across Asia have been either both supported or shaped by information technology. Thus, the Association of Management may take a considerable satisfaction from its co-sponsorship of the first Asia focus issue in a major information management journal. However, when considering the beehive of activity here, perhaps we should instead express surprise that it took this long. I certainly feel fortunate in helping to foster greater awareness and communication among our regional management communities by coordinating this pioneering **Focus on Asia** issue.

The response to our Call for Papers last year reflected well on both the reputation of this journal and the timeliness of this particular issue. Even with a relatively short submission period, over two dozen manuscripts were received. This generous amount of raw material has not only enabled a high level of quality articles in this issue, but also prompted our decision to produce additional **Focus on Asia** publications in the near future.

The large volume of submissions also severely tested our capabilities, especially since we had promised to conduct a rigorous review process, to provide generous and constructive advice to the author(s) of each manuscript *and* to have a fast turnaround time. The burdens of planning, reviewing for, and organizing this issue were exacerbated by our globe-spanning activities.

A shared vision, a solid business rationale, extensive management support and hands-on involvement are critical to the success of a global IS (Martinsons, 1992). These factors were important foundations for creating this issue. Fast and effective coordination is another hallmark of success in international businesses. Precisely this type of coordination was realized in having a truly international board of eminent IS management scholars and practitioners reviewing the submitted manuscripts.

We relied extensively on international communications links — direct applications of telecommunications technology (such as electronic mail and fax), together with air express services (which are strategically supported by information technology) and even the more traditional government mail

services (where IT-enabled re-engineering is now prevalent). The most appropriate and cost-effective means was used in each situation. Much the same way, managers must be prepared to apply IT tools and IS development techniques which suit particular applications and organizational contexts. In a refereed journal, the editor typically relies on the help and advice of respected (and hence busy) people. I am most grateful to my editorial review board. I also wish to thank the manuscript authors as well as the office staffs at the City Polytechnic of Hong Kong (soon to be the City University), the Association of Management and Maximilian Press. Their teamwork enabled us to stay on schedule while also assuring the quality of our product. Special appreciation is due to the colleagues who shared my vision and provided ad hoc support to make this issue a reality. They include Aelita Brivins, John Foster, William Hamel, Karin Klenke, Keith Taylor, Simon So, Michael Weininger and Oliver Yau

America and Asia — Similarities and Differences

The importance of these visions often is only apparent in retrospect. Before the start of this decade, there was relatively little research on the comparative or international aspects of information systems. In Asia, the domestically produced IT management literature was scant. This publication demonstrates the rapid development of this research field in the region — a parallel to the economies themselves.

As you read the articles, you will notice similarities between Asia and America, in terms of the important IT management issues, and in how they are being addressed. Perhaps it is reassuring that managers on the other side of the world are grappling with many of the same problems. Our instinctive belief in a common set of fundamentals is supported.

External forces have undeniably influenced IT management in Asia. These significantly include knowledge and ideas diffused from the United States. A look at the references within this issue quickly confirms this. However, we should not get too comfortable. There are also significant differences between American and Asian IT management, in terms of both historic evolution and current practice. Ein-Dor et al (1993) have noted that three groups of cultural variables — economic, demographic and sociological — can affect information systems. All three are relevant when contrasting America and Asia, and also in exploring intra-continent differences.

Asia-Pacific is far more diverse region than either North America or Western Europe. The economies on the western edge of the Pacific have varying mixtures of imported and indigenous management practices. Although a full treatment of the topic is beyond the scope of this editorial, the diversity of cultures, government policies and environmental circumstances does help to explain the differences in macroeconomic

development and IT assimilation.

Asian Stages of Growth

In an era of multinational enterprises and virtual globalization, a wide gamut of IS management issues are likely to be relevant, including those in the lesser developed countries. There, computer to employee ratios are very low and IT management is an unknown known concept. As an example, in Vietnam, a population of 70 million has less than 50 mainframes and perhaps 10,000 low-end personal computers. The primary focus is on infrastructural issues rather than strategic or even operational issues.

However, as countries pass through stages of economic development and IT usage, the relevant management issues change. Much of this transformation is predictable from the experiences of the United States and other advanced nations. Our own conceptual literature, with the Nolan (1979) stages of growth model and its recent adaptation by Galliers and Sutherland (1991), is helpful. Nevertheless, the effects of varying political systems, different social and culture influences and the nature of domestic resources are also relevant.

Our readers are likely to be most interested in the more advanced Asian economies. Indeed, our articles come from these environments, and more specifically from a pair of emergent *growth triangles*. Such triangles are the result of differential development. Technology and capital from relatively advanced countries are combined with the human and natural resources of their less-developed neighbours. This has enable quality output at competitive prices.

These triangles are found at the southern tip of peninsular Malaysia (which includes Singapore and northwestern Indonesia) and in southern China (which includes Hong Kong and Taiwan). As the financial and commercial hubs of these growth triangles, Hong Kong and Singapore are among the most intensive and innovative users of information technology. Thus, it is not surprising that four of our five articles come from these two city-states.

The Journey Ahead

Our authors will take us on an interesting and informative journey in the subsequent pages. True to the Associa-

tion of Management mission, each **Focus on Asia** article straddles the research and practice of IT management. They report on important contemporary issues in Asia, and offer clear recommendations for practice.

Yap, Raman and Leong begin with a broad look at the demand for IT support in government agencies across the Asia-Pacific region. Burn, Tye, Ma and Poon take a supply-side perspective, considering the motivations of IT professionals in Hong Kong. Neo and Leong use Singapore's pioneering T...deNet application to derive a typology of risk management strategies. Lin takes us further along the systems development cycle to consider user resistance in the Chinese culture context. A final article by Wong returns us to Hong Kong, to examine the growing concerns about data protection and individual privacy.

The contents of this issue represent a significant contribution to our knowledge of IT management in Asia. My hope is that you will also find them helpful in understanding the current status and future directions of the field in this dynamic region.

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