

DECISION LINE

Vol. 37, No. 5

October 2006

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See **NOMINATIONS**, page 47



PRESIDENT'S LETTER

Changing Times

Mark Davis, Bentley College
President, Decision Sciences Institute

"The Times They Are a Changin'"
(Bob Dylan, American folksinger)

Before I get to the main focus of this letter, I want to thank Mo Mahmood, this year's program chair, and his program committee for putting together a great conference. Having been a program chair myself, I know all of the time and effort that is required to organize a meeting like this.

Speaking of changing times, being born and raised in Boston, I always dread November. The leaves have fallen

See **PRESIDENT'S LETTER**, page 48

Inside This Issue

FEATURES

From the Editor. <i>Decision Line</i> Editor Keong Leong provides an overview of 37(5) feature articles.	3
Research Issues. "The Trials and Tribulations of Supply Chain Management Research," by Thomas J. Goldsby, Gatton College of Business & Economics, University of Kentucky	4
In the Classroom. "Facing the Problem of Spreadsheet Errors," by Ray Panko, University of Hawaii.	8
Ecommerce. "Using Ajax to Clean up a Web Site: A New Programming Technique for Web Site Development," by Allen Schmidt, Madison Area Technical College; and Kenneth E. Kendall, Rutgers University.	11
The Deans' Perspective. "Business School Rankings: Love Them or Hate Them?," by Robert E. Markland, Associate Dean, Moore School of Business, University of South Carolina.	14
From the Bookshelf. "The Art & Craft of Case Writing," by Chetan S. Sankar, College of Business, Auburn University.	18

SPECIAL REPORTS

2006 Annual Meeting Program Chair's Message	27
2006-07 DSI Committees	41
2007 DSI Call for Papers	44

DEPARTMENTS

<i>Names in the News</i>	25
<i>Announcements</i>	26
<i>Marketplace</i>	51

DSI members who have changed their e-mail address in the last year should notify the Home Office (dsi@gsu.edu) with current contact information before December 1st. In January, the Home Office will e-mail the 2007 Officer Election Ballots to all DSI members.

from the trees, and we usually don't get our first real snowfall until December (light flurries don't count). Consequently, I always find November to be bleak with cold, damp weather and barren scenery. So I am very excited about going to San Antonio for this year's DSI annual meeting. The average high temperature in San Antonio in November is 71°F (versus 52°F for Boston), providing just the right climate for enjoying walks along the Riverwalk.

There is an old Chinese proverb, "May you live in interesting times," and for those of us who teach in business schools we could never imagine such interesting times as we now have. (In fact I am sure there are occasions when we wish they weren't so interesting!) We have witnessed changes both in what we teach and how we teach. In terms of content, we now offer courses in e-business, business processes, and Internet marketing, to name a few, none of which existed a decade ago. In terms of course delivery, we now offer online courses and distance learning courses in addition to the traditional teaching in brick and mortar classrooms. And while we have seen significant changes in the last several years, we are just scratching the surface; we are seeing only the tip of the iceberg.

The underlying cause for all of these changes is, of course, technology, specifically information technology. But before we get too far ahead of ourselves, we need to take a quick look back to see where we've been, and where we are today so we can better understand where we are going, or better yet, should be going. Because, as someone once said (I don't know who), "If we don't know where we are, a map won't help." At the same time, to quote another unknown source, "If we don't know where we are going, any road will do."

From the beginning of recorded history, there have always been business issues that needed to be addressed. For example, the Egyptians used Project Management to build the pyramids; Columbus, when he discovered America, was seeking an alternative supply chain to reduce the costs and order delivery time for spices from the Far East.

One of the major challenges we, as academics, face is what a close colleague of mine refers to as being limited by "ancient thinking." How many times have you heard colleagues argue that they cannot reduce the amount of classes for a course because there is the "minimum core knowledge" that must be covered? However, to quote Peter Drucker: "In the society of organizations, it is safe to assume that anyone with any knowledge will have to acquire new knowledge every four or five years or become obsolete." Given that we have a zero sum game in academia, in terms of the total number of courses required for a degree and the fact that new knowledge about every subject is constantly being introduced, then we either have to drop some of what is considered to be core content, not introduce any new, more relevant material, or arrive at some combination of the two. Hopefully, there will be some synergy here where we can present in a more contemporary context some of the core principles that continue to be relevant in every discipline.

In the field of Operations Management, for example, these core principles include the facts that (a) quality will always be important, (b) there will always be tradeoffs (albeit on superior tradeoff curves that are created by technology), and (c) everything we do, regardless of the area in which we work, involves a process. In fact, to quote W. Edwards Deming, "If you can't describe what you are doing as a process, then you don't know what you are doing."

So where does that bring us today in teaching operations management? Business processes have replaced processes; offshoring has replaced outsourcing; services have replaced manufacturing; six sigma has replaced variance reduction; lean manufacturing/services has replaced process improvement. (I am sure similar "updating" has occurred in every business discipline.)

What's important here is that we recognize that many of the underlying concepts still hold true; only new words/terms are being applied to them. This is what I call the "sizzle," which is usually promoted by consultants as the next hot management tool. Never-

theless, while the concepts remain basically the same, we, as teachers, must adopt the new terminology in the classroom to show relevance to students. Without this relevance, students, especially business school students, have no motivation to learn. Their primary purpose for attending college is to learn tools with which to obtain better jobs after they graduate.

In addition, from a broader academic perspective, teams have replaced the individual; transdisciplinary has replaced disciplinary; global has replaced national.

What are the implications for those of us who teach in business schools? First, we need to take a much broader look in every direction in terms of what we teach and how we teach. We need to do a better job of understanding how each of our own disciplines interacts with the other disciplines. We need to understand cultures in other parts of the world, that difference is good; it is not a matter of right or wrong, but different. As I tell my students when we take them on a study tour to Europe, one of the main goals of the trip is to get them "to know that they don't know," because most of us don't know that we don't know and that is how we get into trouble. We need to place more emphasis on the teaching of services. With few exceptions, the vast majority of our students will be working in a service environment. The odds are that even those working in a manufacturing environment will be working in services in one form or another. We need to continue developing transdisciplinary courses or cluster courses that clearly show the critical linkages between the various disciplines. We need to conduct research that is transdisciplinary, cross-cultural, and, at the same time, both relevant and rigorous. If we do a good job here, the research will make us better teachers in the classroom.

It's hard to teach an old dog new tricks, but this old dog is willing to try to learn them. I don't see any real alternative. The times, especially in business schools, are indeed changing. Like it or not, welcome to the 21st century! ■