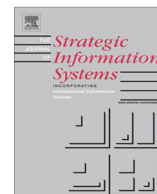




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Strategic signalling and awards: Investigation into the first decade of AIS best publications awards

Shahla Ghobadi^{a,*}, Daniel Robey^b^a Alliance Manchester Business School, The University of Manchester, UK^b J. Mack Robinson College of Business, Georgia State University, United States

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ABSTRACT

Professional organizations for academics such as the Academy of Management and Association for Information Systems (AIS) create best publications awards to honour and promote exemplary contributions that align with the core values and priorities of their distinct fields. Despite the strategic importance of awards, researchers rarely investigate meaningful patterns implicit in the contribution characteristics of award-winning articles. We conduct a reconstructive study of the 10-year history of the AIS Best Publications Awards by outlining a framework that reveals contribution characteristics, demographic patterns, and citation histories of the award-winning articles. Comparing the AIS results to a complete sample of MIS Quarterly paper-of-the-year articles (1993–2015) demonstrates consistent patterns implicit in IS articles that win best publications awards. We develop a model that explains both how these awards shape patterns and discusses what changes might be needed as the field confronts new realities. Our analyses reinforce the importance of taking strategic actions to support the continuous development of the field and advance literature on change and evolving trends in academic fields.

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Introduction

Scholars often demonstrate reflexivity about their disciplines by exploring how research topics and academic journals progress over time and how strategic priorities evolve (Colquitt and Zapata-Phelan, 2007; Gable, 2010; Merali et al., 2012; Sidorova et al., 2008). Research on strategy broadly suggests that professional organizations use signalling mechanisms such as awards to direct attention to high-level priorities (Frey, 2006; Skaggs and Snow, 2004). In the realm of science, granting awards for outstanding contributions is an influential initiative with a powerful social function to signify special accomplishments reflective of a profession's most important core elements. Best publications awards are widely understood as symbolic recognitions of high quality work that is presented at a conference or published in a journal.

In the management field, several divisions of the Academy of Management recognize best papers annually, and in the past ten years the Association for Information Systems (AIS) has recognized up to five articles at its annual International Conference on Information Systems (ICIS). Bestowing awards to papers that represent exemplary contributions is understandably a strategic means to expose and advance the values and priorities of the profession. For example, each year, selection of the AIS award-winning articles is made by the "senior scholars best publications committee," which reviews the nominations made by journal editors and selects a group of semi-finalists for further consideration. The committee finalizes the selection of award-winning articles following review of the nominations (AIS, 2016).

* Corresponding author at: Sackville Street Building, G15 Manchester Business School, The University of Manchester, Manchester M13 9PL, UK.
E-mail address: Shahla.ghobadi@manchester.ac.uk (S. Ghobadi).

Despite the strategic importance of awards, scholars rarely investigate meaningful patterns implicit in the contributions made by award-winning articles. There is dearth of insight into the notion of professional awards as a strategic mechanism that signals values and priorities of the entire field. Nonetheless, award-winning articles can serve as isomorphic pressures (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983) that influence researchers' perceptions of values and priorities of the field. Contribution characteristics of research that has attracted official recognition can then be emulated and accumulate over years and solidify as consistent patterns influencing the field. Vigilant research is required to help us understand whether and how strategic signalling through awards produces consistent patterns, which in turn helps to identify strategic reorientations necessary to fuel the sustainability of the field (Colquitt and Zapata-Phelan, 2007; Merali et al., 2012).

In this study, our goal is to explore strategic signalling in information systems research by delving into patterns in the contribution characteristics implicit in the sample of AIS Best Publications Awards. In particular, we ask: *What contribution patterns do articles that receive AIS Best Publications Awards represent?* To address this research question, we conduct a reconstructive study of the complete 10-year history of the AIS award-winning articles since the inception of the program in 2006 through 2015. Using insights from prior research on scientific awards (MacLeod, 1971; Coupé, 2003) and theoretical contributions of journal articles (Colquitt and Zapata-Phelan, 2007; Sutton and Staw, 1995; Whetten, 1989), we perform a content analysis of 45 award-winning articles to identify contribution characteristics associated with best publications awards. While we focus initially on theoretical contributions, given their centrality in prior research, we also include methodological contributions due to the presence of highly cited methodology articles in our sample. We then compare the results with data from the complete set of 22 MIS Quarterly Paper-of-the-Year awards (1993–2015).

Analysis of the complete sample of 67 award-winning articles reveals patterns in terms of contributions to theory building, theory testing, and method expansion. This finding aligns with research on strategic change that views organizations and the various groups within them as interpretive communities with sense making capabilities (Balogun et al., 2015; Kaplan, 2008). We develop a model that explains why best publications awards contribute to the development of patterns, and how the formation of patterns is linked to the dynamics of change in organizational values and priorities. By highlighting the role of best publications awards in shaping patterns, we build on IS studies that stress the importance of taking strategic actions to support the continuous development of the field (Gable, 2010; Merali et al., 2012; Sidorova et al., 2008). In addition, our analyses and model advance literature on evolving trends in academic fields (Becher and Trowler, 2001; Colquitt and Zapata-Phelan, 2007; Merali et al., 2012).

The next section offers a background on scientific awards followed by a discussion of the most widely acknowledged criterion for bestowing awards: theoretical contributions. We then present the research methodology, including the criteria used to score the articles. We next present our results, followed by a discussion of the implications of analysis for research and for the award-granting process.

Awards in science

The study of awards relates to many topics of central importance in sociology, education, economics and psychology, the most important ones being symbolic and nonmonetary incentives, reputation, social status, self-esteem, social comparisons, and motivation (Baurmann, 2002; Bourdieu, 1979; Boyt et al., 2001; Brennan and Pettit, 2004; Glejser and Heyndels, 2001; Marmot, 2004). From the Academy Awards (“Oscars”) in motion pictures to the Booker prize in literature and the Sports Personality of the Year in sports, awards are ubiquitous in all spheres of society (Czarniawska, 2000). For centuries, academia has used an elaborate and extensive system of awards to recognize and enhance scientific discoveries (Frey and Neckermann, 2009). Scientific awards are typically sponsored by professional associations of scientists and academicians and therefore may be considered as a type of extrinsically administered reward, in contrast to intrinsic rewards that ensue directly from participation in scientific activities.

Academic awards are important because they signal what kind of behavior or contribution is valued by the scientific community as judged by the award donor (MacLeod, 1971). The institutions bestowing awards organize special presentation ceremonies, promote the occasion of awards in media, and exhibit the awards visibly. Such signalling in professional associations is relevant and influential because academics are accustomed to pursuing their own interests rather than “following orders”, and thus strategic signalling through awards is more likely to shape academic fields.

Although some programs of scientific recognition carry monetary awards, most are non-material or symbolic, contrast with strategy formulation and implementation in more hierarchically structured organizations, and do not dictate new strategic directions. By publicizing the winners' ground-breaking works, these awards motivate scholars, intensify the competition for scientific discoveries, and stimulate increased scientific production. Scholars are motivated to seek awards because they help to establish a social distinction that is not achievable by other means. As Huberman et al. (2004) have shown experimentally, people value status independently of any monetary consequence and they are even willing to incur material costs to obtain status.

The material cost involved in granting an award is minimal compared to the social value it creates and the indirect benefits it may bring the recipient (Coupé, 2003). Not surprisingly, the recipients of awards tend to exhibit loyalty and bond psychologically to the award giver. Awards may strengthen professional bonds by displaying exemplary accomplishment achieved within the profession while granting recipients the status of role models. The motivating potential of awards is believed to be particularly great in professions where intrinsic motivation is important and is unlikely to be crowded out by monetary compensation (e.g., volunteering and humanitarian sectors, academia, arts, military, and public service).

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