“So what can I do with an MIS degree?” -
Inspiring students to explore MIS
by drawing on local innovators

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Abstract

Recently the ISEDJ introduced a new area within its case study category that seeks to capture and disseminate successful classroom practices and teaching strategies. The primary motivation behind this enterprise is the construction of a repository that will help new academics draw from successful classroom strategies and techniques that have been successfully employed by peers around the world. This paper is a contribution toward this inaugural effort. The aim of this paper is to share a website we developed that helps our department tackle several challenging problems including the active engagement of students throughout the MIS curriculum, recruiting students to the MIS major and connecting our students and program to innovators throughout our region. Through this site we are effectively showing our students the importance of gaining a deeper understanding of technology and how studying MIS can help one pursue almost any career imaginable. This paper describes the site we developed and clearly shows how others can implement this format within their programs. Finally, this is applicable to all courses within the MIS Model Curriculum.

Keywords: MIS enrollment, MIS Curriculum, Student Recruitment, Innovation, Entrepreneurship
1. Introduction

“So what can I do with an MIS degree?” This is a question that almost every MIS faculty member is asked by prospective students. In fact, in our discipline’s recent history it appears that many of us have not had a satisfactory answer to this simple question as evidenced by the enrollment declines observed globally. This realization and the subsequent conversation and ideas on how to combat enrollment declines has been documented widely and discussed in many of the major MIS journals (Koch, Slyke, et al 2010; Gefen, Ragowsky, et al 2012). For those of us who have committed our professional lives to the advancement of our discipline we are somewhat puzzled by the question because from our perspective the answer is self-evident: “What can’t you do with an MIS degree?”

The transformative role of technology and its importance are well-documented and a crucial element of modern business and society. In fact, this is one of the dominant narratives of our time and its importance can’t be overstated (Friedman and Mandelbaum 2012; Schmidt and Cohen 2013). Furthermore, many argue that a critical understanding of technology is also necessary for the cultivation of an informed citizenry, which underpins dynamic and vibrant nations (Rushkoff and Purvis 2010). This is why it is particularly surprising that many of our students don’t see the connection between studying MIS and a successful career. The faculty in our program have been wrestling with this issue and have made substantial contributions to the discipline’s exploration of the enrollment crisis (Firth, Lawrence, et al 2008, Eoin and Firth 2013). The aim of this paper is to share a successful strategy that has far surpassed our expectations. Initially we simply wanted to inspire our students by introducing them to interesting people doing great work in our area. However, it has turned into a resource that has captured the imagination of not only our students but also the larger technology and entrepreneurial communities in our region. This has been particularly helpful because our MIS program is increasingly drawing students interested in entrepreneurship.

Each profile consists of six questions, which are:

1) Who are you and what are you doing?
2) What hardware are you using?
3) What software and web services do you use?
4) Describe the system you use to manage your work?
5) What books, ideas and people have influenced your thinking and might be of interest to others?
6) What can our state do to increase its creative and entrepreneurial cultures?

In choosing participants we seek out people we believe our students can identify with and ask them to write their profiles in an approachable engaging way. When visiting the site the reader will immediately notice that we strive to feature a diverse group of occupations and individuals. The profiles range from coders working in their basements to successful entrepreneurs who have sold their company for

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hundreds of millions of dollars. Perhaps the most useful feature is that we link to all of the technologies and resources our featured guests reference. For example, if a developer uses Github to manage software development we link to the technology. We also ask the participants to share two pictures with our audience. The first being a profile image while the other is a picture of their workspace. In the future we are considering having participants share a screenshot of their mobile device’s home screen as well.

The management of this project takes some planning and organization particularly as this project has grown. For example, we currently have over forty-five people working on profiles. We have streamlined our processes and rely heavily on Google Docs. We simply create and share a document with the person completing the profile. They complete the profile and subsequent revisions in Google Docs prior to being published on our site. In addition we rely on two Google Spreadsheets to track profiles that are actively being worked on as well as setting and managing the publishing schedule. The simple tools we use allow us to easily manage this project and are widely available to colleagues around the world. We choose to host our site off of the university’s servers as this allows us more freedom in the process. The hosting requirements are modest and all modern higher education institutions can easily provide the hosting capabilities for a project such as this.

We introduced the site to our students in October 2012 by taking a little time to share the project with students in many different courses ranging from our Intro to MIS course to graduate students within our MBA program. We shared with them our goal for the project and demonstrated how the site worked. We then placed links to the site in our learning management system and announced new profiles as they were published. Our early intention was to get them to begin to explore and learn about people and technology on their own and without the motivation of an exam. We chose not to introduce exam questions related to the profiles in our courses and we will probably keep that policy in place during the next academic year. Almost immediately we began to receive positive comments from students across our program. As new profiles were published we would often begin class by discussing the profile and the technologies our features were using.

Throughout the last academic year there were two dominant themes that emerged from our students related to this project. The first major theme was the surprise our students had when they learned about the interesting people within our region doing work of which our students had no conception. We often choose to feature people that have chosen paths out of the typical corporate environment and have instead pursued more entrepreneurial and creative opportunities, a concept which is consistent with the direction of our school and program. Slowly our students began to look at our region and its business environment in a different and more positive way. In addition, we are able to show how technology is often a critical component that is infused throughout the modern work environment. We then began to invite some of the people we profiled into the classroom as guest speakers, which has been an extremely successful practice.

The next major theme we identified will surprise some outside of our discipline, but many MIS faculty will not be the least bit surprised. This theme concerns the exposure of our students to widely available mainstream technologies that they have no idea about. The authors of this paper collectively have over 50 years of experience teaching undergraduate and graduate MIS courses and we believe one of the greatest myths regarding the “millennial” generation concerns this cohorts technical sophistication. While today’s students have grown up with digital technology embedded in their lives, it is our experience that a significant proportion of this group only use these incredible digital tools in very superficial ways. Therefore, discussing the various technologies in class turns out to be a tremendous learning opportunity as it exposes our students to new tools and applications, while simultaneously encouraging them to explore in a low pressure environment. Effectively, we are introducing our students to successful people with whom they can often identify and then showing them that these individuals are using technology in powerful and interesting ways.

The exposure and exploration of these themes in class discussions helps our students see the power of an MIS degree. We emphasize that studying MIS helps prepare people to take advantage of the technology-intensive nature of modern business regardless of the industry or area within which they wish to work. In addition, we show our students that it is incumbent upon
them to go beyond the surface of technology and to dive deeper. Once we discuss the profiles it is self evident to our students that their own use of technology often pales in comparison to how these successful people are using these tools. Furthermore, we encourage our students to look critically at their own use of technology, and to realize that their use often favors the simple consumption of information rather than higher level creative and management applications of technology.

While we are thrilled with our students interest we are equally happy, and surprised, by the interest in this project by outside constituencies including the tech and entrepreneurship communities. We hear regularly from members of these groups and their interest in this project. It turns out that our site serves as an important resource for some members of these communities to learn about people, technical tools as well as influences of those we profile. This also helps our program to connect with these individuals, which allows us to share what we are working on and to get them involved with our program and students. This has also turned out to be a good mechanism for connecting students with employers for internships and job opportunities. In addition, some of those featured have been asked to join our MIS advisory board.

3. Google Analytics Report

We are surprised at the reach and the number of viewers our site received from October 1, 2012 through May 31, 2013. Appendix A reflects metrics captured through Google Analytics. The data presented are descriptive measures that simply illuminate the general exposure the site received. As the Google Analytics report indicates, we received over seven thousand unique visitors, which implies that our reach is well beyond our student population. Interestingly 67.7% of our viewers are new viewers while 32.3% are returning viewers meaning that we have over two thousand viewers that have returned over multiple sessions. In the future we plan to develop a more sophisticated set of measures to specifically capture our students’ use of the site and its affect on their choice of major. We hope to report our findings to colleagues through this journal.

4. Conclusions

This paper represents a contribution toward a new category within the case study area of the ISEDJ. The project outlined in this paper has far exceeded our expectations and we believe colleagues from around the world will find our experience useful and easily see ways they can implement this concept. As the field of MIS continues to mature and evolve we must strive to find creative and novel ways to engage our students and show them the value and power behind the MIS discipline. We submit the effectiveness of this project is due to the fact that we bring in credible and interesting voices from outside the academy to convey the value of integrating business and technical knowledge, which, at the end of the day, is the story of MIS.

5. References


Friedman, T. L., & Mandelbaum, M. (2012). That used to be us: how America fell behind in the world it invented and how we can come back. New York: Picador/Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

2011 Panel Report: Are We on the Wrong Track and Do MIS Curricula Need to Be Reengineered? *Communications of the Association for Information Systems, 30*(1).


Appendix A

Audience Overview

Oct 1, 2012 - Jun 1, 2013

Visits

7,155 people visited this site

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