

# FROM PRACTICE TO RESEARCH: A CASE FOR PROFESSIONALLY QUALIFIED DOCTORAL STUDENTS IN A NETWORKED SOCIETY

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## Abstract

*Some PhD students have accumulated a relevant work experience before they join the academic community, giving rise to a profile of PhD students, earlier described as PQDS (Professionally Qualified Doctoral Students). Is this profile a valuable asset IS should take interest in, or is it more of a constraint? Based on the work of Klein and Rowe (2008), we answer this question with two introspective analyses. We show that PQDS are at ease with qualitative methodologies linked with field research and thus represent an opportunity for IS to root research questions in real and practical problems met in organizations. We recognize that PQDS must meet the challenge to acquire an academic way of thinking while preserving a deep knowledge of the field. We conclude that the opportunity offered by PQDS's professional experience may lie in their ability to help IS research on the adoption and diffusion dimensions.*

*Keywords: PQDS, qualitative research, Information Systems, autoethnography, doctoral student.*

## **Introduction**

In a networked society researchers have to improve their ability to connect to practitioners. This will in turn have a positive impact on IT adoption outside the academic community. New research approaches require new “tools” and new methodologies to collect and analyze data. PDQS (Professionally Qualified Doctoral Students) and autoethnography are two prospective candidates.

This article aims to understand why PDQS profiles may be of interest for research in IS, and how their profile influences their choice of methodology. We use an ex-post introspective methodology and focus on the case of two PQDS. We explain why their choice of a specific qualitative research method, namely autoethnography, is relevant with their previous professional experience, and how this may prove useful for their future research, as well as for the IS research community.

We are interested in the study of PDQS profiles because (1) doctoral students are increasingly coming from different horizons; (2) we answer to previous calls for future research (e.g. Klein & Rowe 2008); and (3) these profiles may be useful for adopting and diffusing IS research.

Based on existing literature and enriched by our two case studies, we propose a framework for identifying advantages and limits of PQDS for IS research.

## **1 PDQS: a pragmatic legitimacy**

### **1.1 A boundary researcher**

In the current socio-economic environment, changing jobs is fairly common. The 2008 economic crisis translated for some in an opportunity for self-reflection and a search for a new “meaning of life”. In these last years, PQDS specific profile thus became more visible, and less atypical (see for e.g. Mathiasen & Sandberg 2013; Evans 1997). Capitalizing on a long professional experience, they then turn towards an academic career. Klein and Rowe (2008) coined the expression “PDQS”, and studied them in the IS research field. They support the opinion that this stream of researchers represent a possible alternative for a question formulated by Markus (1997): How to gain a pragmatic appreciation for qualitative IS research ?

PDQS profiles are rare in Europe, and even rarer in France, where we conducted our study. English speaking universities may relate them to DBA (Doctorate of Business and Administration). DBA mainly concerns practitioners and focuses on theory application in a professional context (Stoddard 2014), whereas PhD (*Philosophiae* Doctorate) students pursue new theoretical developments. PDQS are on the boundary of these existing profiles. Thus our research may be of interest for any doctoral student holding a significant professional experience relating to his research field, whatever the diploma he/she pursues.

We must also question how IS research gains practical relevance and how this helps researchers in developing legitimacy and credibility towards field actors (Applegate & King 1999; Benbasat & Zmud 1999). Three dimensions of relevance are critical in order to bring IS research to practitioners (Applegate & King 1999; Benbasat & Zmud 1999). The first criterion, (1) importance, relies on the ability to address the needs of stakeholders, in a time span relevant to practitioners. (2) Accessibility refers to the way researchers build demonstrations in order to make their results understandable to corporate actors in the IS field. At last, research should provide guidance, direction and concrete recommendations (Klein et al. 2006). This is the (3) suitability criterion (Rosemann & Vessey 2008), which deals with applicability of the research for practitioners.

Seeking to improve relevance in IS, Klein and Rowe (2008) got interested in PDQS. These authors were convinced that research material produced by ex-practitioners might be relevant not only by its content (importance aspect), but also by the way PDQS bring/communicate it (accessibility). By mastering vocabulary, codes and conventional wisdom used within their (ex-) community of practice,

PDQS can relate to the two communities and provide an interesting contribution to put research into practice. This is due to the fact that PDQS are rooted in practice and can make useful contributions to a manager's everyday practice. Thus, research led by PDQS, previously trained to research methods, may help to bridge research and practice communities. Such figures, defined by previous literature as "boundary spanners" (Levina & Vaast 2005), play an enabling role: they enable collaboration between different social groups, otherwise impossible.

What kind of advantages do PDQS provide over other kinds of doctoral students? With their professional experience, PDQS hold an inherent advantage on corporate know-how and have deep knowledge of sociological, organizational and technological dimensions. Technological dimension is particularly relevant for IS research. At first, this knowledge may only be tacit (Mohamad Hisyam Selamat & Jyoti Choudrie 2004). PDQS also often present proficiencies in communication and socialization (Klein & Rowe 2008), and may have developed their own social network with practitioners. These implicit skills may grant them an easier access to some fields of studies; and are useful for research in IS. Practitioners also tend to behave in a more open and sincere way with researchers who have a previous corporate experience, speak the same language, and are aware of their vocabulary and codes of practice.

This leads us to define PDQS according to their research objectives and their professional experience (Cf. fig.1).

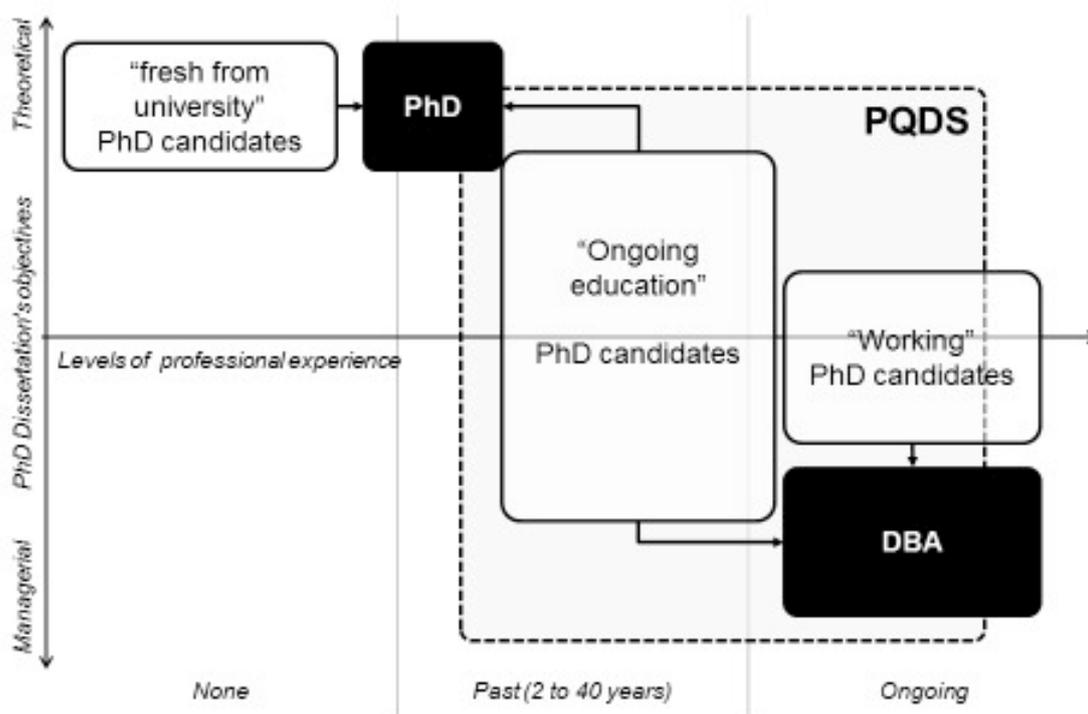


Figure 1: Typology proposal according to experience and objectives; with relations to diplomas

## 1.2 Temporal alignment

Surely, a research question emerging from a practitioner may have a greater legitimacy from the practice point of view. The researcher, a previous practitioner her/himself, has a practical insight of corporate situations. He apprehends them with the right degree of complexity and depth, and may be less sensible to research fashions.

As a matter of fact, research and professional conferences alike tend to present subjects and questions that are doomed to become out of date. Nowadays, new technologies and new organizational trends

prevail. Looking at manifestations programs these days, RFID (Radio Frequency Identification), SCM (Supply Chain Management), BPM (Business Process Management), Digitalization and Big Data occupy the center stage. By focusing on these new tools, academic research sometimes loses sight of managerial implications and issues. Previous authors already identified this gap between research and managerial worlds (Klein & Hirschheim 2006).

Numerous factors may explain this gap which has a negative impact on IS research legitimacy. The dialogue between academic and managerial worlds may be difficult because each one evolves in different communities of practice. For example, researchers who are used to participate in professional events usually do not write many academic papers, and *vice versa*. These two different communities have different mindsets, visions, priorities, values and criteria to determine what is relevant knowledge (Klein & Rowe 2008). One may also suggest that temporalities differ between academic and managerial words. For instance, a PhD dissertation lasts at least three years; and an article in a peer-reviewed journal may be published years after the actual study. As Lyytinen (1999, p.26) noticed, “much of what we teach on technology and practice is outdated by five years at least.” On the other hand, IS managers must deal with much shorter cycles, and are much more subject to changes in market environment. This difference in temporality creates a gap. PDQS can better align managerial and research concerns; and thus contribute to reduce the temporality gap between research and practice.

## **2 Case studies: Two PDQS profiles**

In the following case studies, we refer to our autoethnographic works. We use a different narrative form, by turning to what Ellis (2004) describes as “The ethnographic I”.

### **2.1 PDQS case study 1: From company practice to research study**

Following the financial crisis in 2008, the industrial company for which I was working as a Logistics Chief Project encountered economic issues. I left the company in 2010 accepting a voluntary departure plan. I then found myself at a crossroads after six years working for the same company. After some thoughts, contained aspiration became a real desire of change. At this point I decided to choose to go for an academic career. My profile as a young researcher can be included in the ones of PDQS described by Klein and Rowe (2008).

My former company activity was to assemble forklift trucks for a Japanese group. I joined this company after a MSc. in International Management. I started in 2004 in charge of parts procurement for a year. At the end of this mission I knew procurement process, had a clear view of the Information System and even more clear view of the procurement related applications. I also had a global vision of the parts internal and external physical flow and their related suppliers. After this first experience, I carried on within the company in a newly created function as Parts Project Chief. This transversal job in the parts department team consisted to manage the continuous improvement activity, to drive quality circles and work on various studies and projects requested by internal (other departments) or external customers (suppliers and customers). I acquired new competencies through this new job as project management, problem solving and team building. The need to study company data throughout improvement projects increased my knowledge about global IS and other departments. I carried this mission during three years and then took over another job even more transversal as Logistics Project Chief for the whole company. This new position gave me access to additional knowledge regarding internal logistics flows and suppliers management. I could work on industrial organization which was different than my former department where processes were closer to trading business. I stayed in this position two years and left definitively the company in 2010.

During this professional experience, I witnessed numerous examples of operational logistics underperformance; particularly following IS integration in the Supply Chain. This paradox regarding performance objective by the IS questioned me as a practitioner. Yet in the company context, these underperformances were accepted as for the best inherent hazards of IS implementation, sometimes as natural dysfunctions and as for the worst were totally ignored pretending that the IS has been chosen and

adopted objectively and for this reason was the optimal solution whatever it costs afterward. It seemed to me important at that time to identify these underperformances in order to correct and even anticipate them. When I changed to the academic career, I chose to look into the current and past researches if the question of underperformances had already been addressed. I discovered that there was a consensus, not only between practitioners but also between academics on the fact that IT integration in logistics activity improves obviously operation efficiency and even company profit. However it appears that direct linkage between IT integration and company performance improvement have not been yet formally established. While we find in studies some positive results regarding IT integration impact on operational performance increase, they also point out that we get visible improvement only applying certain conditions and accepting new constraints due to implementation. I thought at this point that a research subject regarding my practitioner issue would be relevant for academics and practitioners at the same time. I started my research during my degree with an autoethnography in order to analyze my professional experience while putting things into theoretical perspective.

## **2.2 PDQS case study 2: From companies to training, and then to research**

As soon as 2005, I had envisioned pursuing a MSc dealing with organization. At the time, I was finishing another Masters' program, with a more professional focus. Due to practical reasons, I could not complete this project. During the following six years, I was involved in projects related to organizational transformations. The last project I experienced led me to an autoethnographic work.

The autoethnography was based on my job as an Ideas' System Manager, from 2007 to 2011. This management system had the objective to reverse the traditional hierarchical chain of command, and to give the opportunity to employees to propose and to realize their ideas. This initiative had a systemic dimension and involved various actors: Top Management Team (TMT), all management levels and front-line employees. Given (1) the width and depth of the Organizational Transformation (OT) to achieve and (2) the different environment in which departments evolved; I had to use various communication forms for this project. Doing so enabled a steep rise in ideas suggestion, productivity and work simplification. Implementing this system also led to significantly upgrade the IS used to support the Idea Management System (IMS). This gave me the opportunity to observe interactions between the deployment of a new IS and the OT phenomenon itself. Either facilitating or obstructing, IS played a key role for this OT initiative.

In addition to this job, I was in charge of some teaching to Masters' students in continuing education. In such classes, students were often keen to make sense of their own experience in regard of theoretical frameworks I taught them. Thus you have to help students in this process. It was an important part of the teaching process; and I had experienced it earlier in my own continuous education experience as a student. These experiences laid the foundation of an autoethnographic work.

During my MSc, a professor introduced us to autoethnography. Echoing my own experience; this methodology seemed to be relevant on personal and professional dimensions. So, when I decided to explore OT during my PhD, it became obvious I had to capitalize on my own experience and to put it into perspective. It was for me a unique opportunity to confront theory and practice. So I led this autoethnographic work before engaging in my PhD. I believe that a professional experience may provide a relevant research study. This choice may seem easy, because the researcher is intimate with such a field. In fact, it requires an extreme rigor and to avoid pitfalls we will later discuss.

## **2.3 From practice to theory**

We will build from our own experiences and observations as practitioners and novice researchers to provide useful insights for the research community. We wish to underline that these insights are the result of our own interpretations, situated at a precise time in our personal career path. Our objective is to better understand PDQS by questioning our own representations, thus adopting an interpretative stance.

### **3 Methodology: An autoethnographic approach**

Having conducted a qualitative research, we focus on a specific reality, within context. According to this principle, it seems easier for a PDQS to grasp reality, since she/he had the opportunity to apprehend it in her/his own past. PDQS naturally subscribe to inductive epistemological stance, because they have acquired various data before even getting interested in any kind of scientific literature.

Among various methodologies, qualitative ones may appeal to PDQS; because they are relevant when one wants to re-enact situations and to give sense to them / analyze them better. Of course, every PDQS' profile influences the choice of a methodology. In our case, the two authors conducted an autoethnographic study for a dissertation; before committing themselves to a research career. Thus, we recognize that we can learn from our own experience (Denzin & Lincoln 2005). Ethnography helps PDQS to bridge their professional experience and their research goals. As such, ethnography is an essential mean to study organizational culture (Boyle & Parry 2007). PDQS are often attracted by ethnographical studies. It helps them to make sense of their professional life regarding their research objectives.

#### **3.1 Where does autoethnography stand?**

First of all, we should define what autoethnography is. Holman Jones defines it as an equilibrium act, that creates moments of clarity, connection and change (in Denzin & Lincoln 2005, p.764). Another definition may echo to PDQS "research, writing and method that connect the autobiographical and personal to the cultural sans social. This form usually features concrete action, emotion, embodiment, self-consciousness and introspection (Ellis, 2004)."

Originally, autoethnography was used by anthropologists studying their own culture (Hayano 1979). Because subject and researcher becomes one, it differs from ethnography. When conducting an autoethnography, researcher and subject are melted in one individual. Such auto-expositions are popular and flourishing in social sciences (Gegen & Gegen in Outhwaite & Turner 2007). It makes it possible to explain the conscious process of construction in regard to the research object. The growing dissemination of this methodology in various fields of research may lead to consider its applicability in the IS field. This form of "boundary blurring inquiry", as Richardson describes it, may be an opportunity for more critical and creative case studies (in Denzin & Lincoln 2005).

Boyle and Parry (2007) identify three major interests to conduct autoethnographies: "First, this approach has the ability to connect the everyday, mundane aspects of organizational life with that of broader political and strategic organizational agendas and practices. Second, we propose that autobiographical and retrospective approaches are more likely to unearth and illuminate the tacit and subaltern aspects of organization. For example, an effective piece of autoethnographic writing will always engage the reader to the point where organizational processes such as emotional ambivalence, organizational deadlocks and roadblocks, and the variable and vicarious nature of organizational relationships are brought into stark relief. Third, we acknowledge that there is no perfect methodology and autoethnography does have its problems (Morse, 2000)".

#### **3.2 Why should PDQS use autoethnography?**

During our own professional life, we had the opportunity to work on projects, which were relevant with our research subject. It thus made sense to conduct a reflexive and introspective work. It helped us gain a more enlightened and distanced view on our previous professional experience (Klein & Rowe 2008). It was also an opportunity to make good use of our experience for research. Moreover we believe that developing reflexive and introspective abilities (Ellis in Denzin & Lincoln 2005) thanks to autoethnographic case studies, are in fact a prerequisite for aspiring-PDQS. Without any autoethnographic work prior to conducting research activities, PDQS may still be biased by their experience and preconceptions. Besides, "the ethnographic approach involves immersion in the social context being studied. Every interaction and experience constitutes data to be interpreted as a member of the organi-

zation and as a researcher.”(Gioia & Chittipeddi 1991). Such opportunities for continuous and distanced immersion are very few, either for researchers or practitioners; and they should try to make the most benefit of it.

### **3.3 What kind of objective to pursue through autoethnography?**

In the case of organizational autoethnography, "the prime focus of an organizational autoethnographic study is to illuminate the relationship between the individual and the organization in a way that crystallizes the key conceptual and theoretical contributions to understanding the relationship between culture and organization" (Boyle and Parry 2007:185). Thus, we should not ignore theory. Instead, we should mobilize it within our experience to further nourish it and, maybe, make a contribution to it. Such contributions are significant, because PDQS experience is measured in years, and demonstrates a longitudinal and profound immersion.

Through autoethnography, PDQS may pursue three objectives: (1) to handle a research on known grounds, which may be easier to apprehend; (2) ;to conduct a necessary introspection, in order to gain an *ad hoc* perspective on one's own experience; (3) to provide useful insights to research, by focusing on "tacit and subaltern aspects of organization" (Boyle & Parry 2007). In so doing, PDQS can access an organization's "deep structures" (Pentland 1999). She/he can then go beyond the simple description in favor of a situated explanation (Simon 1992). Such works can be of great scientific interest, and are in compliance with Rosemann and Vessey's (2008) criteria: importance, accessibility and applicability.

## **4 PDQS: Limits and perspectives**

### **4.1 Pitfalls PDQS have to face**

Based on Holman Jones and Lincoln's work (2005), we identified three main pitfalls, which stand frequently on the autoethnographer's way: (1) the autoethnography insufficient contextualization. The PDQS will give the false impression that he keeps a scientific distance when avoiding to report testimonies and live observations but he will lose a significant part of his working experience added value. (2) A linear and monotonous writing. PDQS avoid to provoke the reader, ask questions and do neither involve nor disturb the audience (Hughes & Román 1998, p.9). In fact, avoiding to question the reader is not the best way to insure a necessary importance (Rosemann & Vessey 2008). (3) No clarification of the autoethnographic implicit dimension. How could we express the unspoken? Thinking that this task is impossible or too complicated to carry on, some PDQS fail to discuss it.

One should avoid these three pitfalls to contribute improving the research on organizations by using autoethnographic works.

### **4.2 Limitations of the autoethnographic method**

Autoethnography can be assimilated to a unique case study and we are fully aware of the limitations due to a single organization study. We are also aware of the bias linked to the storytelling, even more when it is autoethnographic. We tend to take into account Pentland (1999, p.2) remarks: "Thus, a critical challenge in organizational theory is how to move from surface structure to deep structure, or how to recover a single, objective account from multiple, partial, subjective, and even conflicting accounts. For traditional variable constructs, like those described by Eisenhardt (1989), this is the familiar problem of ensuring validity and reliability (Cook & Campbell, 1979). For process constructs (i.e., explanatory stories) we have no established procedures or tests".

This lack of procedure and tests may be the main limitation of an autoethnographic process. For the PQDS the balance between the position of actor and researcher (Gioia & Chittipeddi 1991) can turn out to be hardly to find. If he fails to find this balance, the relevance of his recommendations will be weakened and his work will not meet the suitability criteria of Rosemann and Vessey (2008).

Exploration of a deep structure gives an importance (Rosemann & Vessey 2008) to the research work because it can help the practitioners to see their work differently. In order to be relevant, the work should be rather done soon after the end of the professional experience. It seldom happens that a practitioner in activity keeps a journal, which could be likened as an ethnographer's research journal. For this reason he will need to construct his journal ex-post lying on meetings minutes, notes, company documents... and on his own memory. This temporal dimension should encourage the doctoral students to engage an autoethnography at the beginning of their doctoral process.

### **4.3 PDQS face an epistemological confinement risk**

We need to highlight the fact that when choosing to conduct an autoethnography, the PQDS adopt an interpretative position (Lee 1991). Two options are possible to carry on his research: Either he chooses to fully fit into in this epistemological framework. He will then draw benefit from autoethnography for future case study. In fact the methodological tools he developed would be useful and will allow him to fit in the mainly used qualitative method in IS which is case study. He will then contribute to IS study as social systems (Lee 1989). Otherwise the doctoral student considers autoethnography as a methodology which does not predict his future epistemological position. In this case he will need to be really cautious not to trap himself in this first methodological experience.

Whatever is the future doctoral student's choice, we think that the autoethnographic study is in any case beneficial to him because he can gain a methodological skill. This skill is at the same time specific to the PDQS and distinctive in his research field. In fact, autoethnography represents a complementary contribution to traditional IS research methods. Our experiences demonstrate its transferability and interest for IS. Furthermore, if IS research succeed in develop an autoethnographic method for its own investigations, it could also be valuable for other researchers in management studies.

## **5 Discussion**

### **5.1 Autoethnography: A unique experience**

The position of the researcher regarding his research object is seemingly different when he appears to be a PDQS. This kind of researcher does not arrive on the field with a brand new look but with a deep professional knowledge and a strong stance about the company world. The double subjectivity is in this way inherent of the PDQS position. He then needs to question his Professional past while developing his searcher's eyes. He is then « unavoidably part of the reality that he suggests to study and cannot be found himself outside the interpretative process » (Giordano 2003, p.21). We admit that becoming fully part of the reality leads to a better sensitivity and understanding of the field. As described earlier, autoethnography answers to the interpretative process and seems to be a suitable method to the transition between professional experience and the conduct of research. The doctoral student may not have another opportunity to be immersed in the field. In fact the future workload of teaching and searching will deny him such an immersion. Therefore it seems difficult to conduct this experiment another time unless being totally involved in the company. This unique experience is also an opportunity to externalize a tacit-knowledge (Mohamad Hisyam Selamat & Jyoti Choudrie 2004), that the PDQS will later be able to share, notably thanks to her/his autoethnographic work.

### **5.2 PQDS: A temporary advantage**

Because the PDQS is part of the company life, she/he should align better than other students to practitioners' issues. However he must question on the accuracy of his research. Will his research question be still accurate in three or five years? (Benbasat & Zmud 1999). The PDQS is aware of current enterprise issues when he starts his research. But as he goes along with his research, he may digress from practitioners' issues. He may be able to reduce this discrepancy by using qualitative methodology and

keeping going on the field. Ethnography but also participative action research or intervention research seem to be the methodologies which offer the deepest understanding of the field.

### **5.3 PDQS' theoretical legitimacy**

Approaches described earlier seem to meet the relevance criteria suggested by Rosemann and Vessey (2008). Relevance would confirm pragmatic contribution for research by PDQS. However it seems also interesting to question if PDQS pragmatism meets the relevance criteria for the academic community. When an issue is important for practitioners, is it also important for academics? Applegate and King (1999) explains in their case study that a research question arising from enterprise issues can sometimes be too wide, too long or too difficult to apply. Also the research field subject can be seen too operational. It is the same for accessibility: The PDQS works and writes in a different way than academic codes require. He has such a deep knowledge of the field that it can appear difficult to relay in an academic paper. Finally the applicability can also be questioned. Can a research based on a single in-depth case study described by one single involved actor open perspective for research?

## **Conclusion**

As Klein and Rowe (2009) discuss in their paper, the PQDS can be seen as an asset for general research but also for IS research particularly. IS research is nowadays still seeking for pragmatic legitimacy. The contribution of a PQDS may be important in that way, and “help bridge the practice-research gap” (Mathiassen & Sandberg 2013). Such a profile can meet the relevance criteria described by Rosemann and Vessey (2008): Importance of the research question regarding practitioner issues, accessibility by its presentation style and suitability to apply research results into the practice. Therefore practitioners and researchers evolve into different communities of practice (Klein & Rowe, 2009). Each one shapes its mind sets, vision, priorities, values and criteria on what is relevant knowledge to them. It seems to us very difficult for a PDQS to fully join both communities while working on the same phenomena. Moreover the benefit acquired by the PDQS regarding his deep knowledge of the field and practitioners issues at the beginning of his research, can fade out as he gradually integrates the academic community. Can he embody at the same time the practical and theoretical legitimacy for IS research? The development of autoethnographic researches in IS could help answer to this question. While developing a research method adapted to IS, PDQS would gain a rigor that would guide them onto the theoretical path. It should also be relevant to look into a « mirror approach ». This approach would be for doctoral students with initial academic training, who gradually acquire after their studies some field knowledge. If autoethnography requires experience perspective from the PDQS, the contrary is also valid for doctoral students who need to get familiar with practice. It would interesting for future research to identify career-path allowing both profiles to join into common theoretical and practical knowledge. Following this study, we do invite doctoral students to suggest research methods in order to facilitate the process of adoption with the practice and practitioners issues.

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