ASIS to ASIS&T: Has There Been a Change in the Conference Content?

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Introduction and Background

The purpose of this study was to investigate whether there has been a change in the content of the research papers published at the ASIS&T annual conference since the Board of Directors’ decision to change the society’s name in 2000 (Mackenzie, 2004). In 1998 Dr. Eugene Garfield, as President-elect of ASIS, suggested the society reassert its “basic commitment to research” (Election underway… 1998, 3). In March 1999, as Dr. Garfield prepared to assume the presidency, he proposed that the word technology be added to the name of the society: ASIS&T. He discussed the loss of membership to the society and the “perceived abandonment of applied information science.” He suggested that ASIS programs have been “divided between theory and practice” and that the society should place increased focus on “practical information technology based programs” (Garfield, 2000). During the debate over the name change, both active support and concern emerged. Supporters of librarianship implied that the focus on technology might overwhelm the society’s focus on both librarianship and information science (Travis, 1999).

Its name, membership, mission, and a variety of characteristics can define a professional association. One such characteristic is the research that is presented at the association’s annual conference and published in the proceedings. An association’s annual conference is its “biggest branding opportunity. The content of the conference program should be strategically developed to ensure that the different disciplines and levels of expertise (and their unmet needs) within the field are sufficiently addressed” (James, 2003). An insight from the 2003 ASIS&T membership survey is that the “primary reason to attend ASIST Conferences is to listen to papers and presentations” (Vaughan & Hahn, 2005, 103) and that 18.6% of the respondents said that the annual conference would be more appealing if there was a change in the content of papers and presentations toward more applied and work related topics (Vaughan & Hahn, 2005, 100). Vaughan and Hahn further concluded that the “great decrease in the percentage of members working in industry and government sectors” might suggest “ASIS&T is losing attraction to people in those sectors…” (2005, 102). Dr. Garfield’s position that our association is losing membership can be tied to, or perhaps remedied by, the content of the annual conference. The renameing of the society was undertaken to attract a broader population and to refocus our attention toward research in applied science. The results of this research offer insights as to whether the shift has started to take place. It is now 2005 and some may suggest that the name change from ASIS to ASIS&T was not significant or offered minimal influence on the society’s research agenda.

Method –Two Stage Study

Stage 1 compared the research content both prior to and following the association’s name change in 2000. 100% of the contributed research papers for the years 1997, 1998, 2003 and 2004 form the source of comparison. The Chi-square non-parametric test was used to compare the results prior to the society’s name change (represented by conference papers published in 1997 and 1998) to after the 2000 name change (papers published in 2003 and 2004) (Sproull 1995).

Stage 2 builds on the assumption that a professional association is, and should be, a reflection of its membership. To provide a well-rounded investigation on the change from ASIS to ASIS&T, a questionnaire was developed to assess whether ASIS&T members perceived any overall difference in the research presented at the conference since the association’s name change in 2000. A total of 430 questionnaires were mailed. The 27% response rate provided sufficient data for conclusions to be cautiously drawn. Descriptive statistics were used to analyze the questionnaire data. In addition, respondents were permitted to provide comments to clarify any aspect of the questionnaire.

Results

The stage 1 results provided both an aggregate and a comparative view of the conference papers presented at the annual conference. Aggregating the results of 1997, 1998, 2003 and 2004 I found that 73.2% of the 194 papers reviewed offered empirical research results with 50% including human subjects in the research design. The word library (or version of the word) appeared within the abstract and/or the title of 27.3% of the 194 contributed papers. Data analysis of objects or knowledge artifacts (i.e., transaction logs) was part of the research design for 38.7% of the papers. An assigned subject task or test was included for 24.7% of the papers and subject observation was included for 16% of the papers. A literature review (and theory) was the sole contribution of 17% of the conference papers. Papers that described systems comprised 16% of the 194 papers reviewed aggregately from 1997, 1998, 2003 and 2004.
Data Pertaining to the Stage 1 Research Questions:

#1: Has there been an increase in empirical research since the association’s change of name in 2000? All 194 contributed papers were coded as either empirical or theoretical. The empirical papers comprised studies that used either quantitative, qualitative or a combination of methods from both paradigms. These studies uncovered new evidence. The theoretical papers were comprised of studies that offered no evidence as to whether the theory presented in the paper was supported or refuted. These papers may have offered new knowledge (i.e., theoretical frameworks) by drawing insights from previous research but no new evidence was offered.

At ASIS&T (after name change) 81.1% of the papers provided empirical results as compared to ASIS (prior to change) in which only 62.7% of the papers were empirical in nature. The results of the Chi-square test revealed that there was a significant difference in the increase of empirical papers from before (52) to after (90) the name change at the \( p \) value = .004.

Another variable that may suggest a move toward more applied research is the number of papers that describe systems (i.e., purpose, performance, design, framework). The results revealed that 22 papers (19.8%) in the ASIS&T (after) proceedings solely described a system. This is an increase of 10.8%. The chi-square test results suggested a statistical difference, though weak, in the increase of contributed papers that focused solely on system descriptions \( p \) value = .067.

#2: Has there been an increase in the use of human subjects within the research design of the published papers? A variable that may suggest a move toward more empirical or applied research is whether human subjects were part of the study’s design. The results revealed that 36 papers before the name change included human subjects (43.4%). The percentage of studies that included human subjects increased to 55% after the name change (61 papers). Using the Chi-square test the results suggested that there is a weak statistical difference in the increase of contributed papers that included human subjects in the design from before the association’s name change (36) to after (61) \( p \) value = .073.

#3: Has there been a reduction in the explicit reference to libraries? The conference papers were reviewed to identify the word library (or version of the word such as librarian or libraries) in either the abstract or the title of each paper. At ASIS (before name change) 38.6% of the papers included the word or a version of the word library in either the abstract or title as compared to ASIS&T (after) in which only 18.9% of the papers included a reference to libraries. Using the Chi-Square test the results suggest a statistical difference in the decrease of papers that reflect a focus on libraries from before the association’s name change (32) to after (21) at the \( p \) value = .004.

Descriptive Results of Stage 2 Quantitative data:

#4: Do ASIS&T members perceive any overall difference in the research presented at the conference since the association’s name change in 2000? The analyzed results for this question reveal that there has been little perceived change to the research presented at the annual conference since expanding its name and thereby expanding the society’s purpose. Although 26.7% of the 116 respondents stated that they had supported the name change, only 12.1% perceived any change in the research presented at the conference since the change. 25.9% of the respondents stated that they had not supported the society’s name change. The remaining 47.4% of respondents were indifferent or did not realize the association’s name had recently changed. To drill down further, I eliminated from the analysis those questionnaires returned by individuals who had not been members prior to 2000, when the society’s name changed. The results from this more select sample of 70 respondents (61.4% female) revealed the following:

- 31.4% of this group stated that they had originally supported the society’s name change.
- 15.7% of the respondents with membership prior to 2000 did perceive a change in the research presented at the annual conference since the change from ASIS.

When considering the perception of only those members involved prior to 2000 who had supported the name change (22 respondents), only 13.6% of the “yes I support the name change” group perceived any change in the research presented at the conference since “ASIS.”

Themes Emerging From Stage 2 Qualitative Data:

The stage 2 questionnaires included an area for the respondent to explain any of his or her answers. 68 of the 116 responses included written comments. Content analysis was used to draw the themes from the data (Berg, 1998).

Changes in conference content. Most of the comments suggested a perceived increase in applied research and an increased focus on practitioners. Negative change to conference content was observed as well. One respondent suggested that “compared to other scientific conferences, ASIS&T is a weaker academic conference in last few years.” An increased focus on technology was a theme that clearly emerged. Most of these comments were positive. One respondent suggested “inviting presenters from outside ASIS&T was easier when they heard the word technology.”

Changes in conference content unrelated to association’s name change. Fifteen comments reflected perceived changes in the conference content but did not want to link them to the change in the association’s name.
Conference content is the same. Eight comments suggested that NO change in content has occurred. There is “still focus on the academic not the applied sciences,” and the “society is still engrained in its former focus on documentation.”

CONCLUSION

Dr. Garfield voiced his concern that the society may be perceived to have abandoned “applied information science” (Garfield, 1999, 2), but the results of stage 1, suggested that as an association of researchers, we may be moving toward a renewed focus of research on practical and applied information. The stage 2 data added a further dimension to this study. Capturing the perceptions of ASIS&T members revealed a weakness among the respondents toward experiencing a shared vision of what ASIS&T is or wants to be. Some members welcomed the increased focus on technology, applied research, and topics of interest to practitioners. Others viewed the changes as negative. The shift in membership is broadening the audience that ASIS&T must serve. The subtle shift away from theoretical toward applied research is welcomed by some and perceived as negative by others.

WORKS CITED