The Midwest chapter of the Association for Information Systems (MWAIS) was founded in Fall of 2005. With founding President, Dan Power’s vision and the help of many people, especially a core leadership team, the organization is fast becoming an important forum for communication between IS researchers, educators and PhD students in the Midwest region. Our first two conferences held in Grand Rapids, MI and Springfield, IL were great successes in this regard.

The broad purpose of MWAIS is to help meet the professional needs of Midwest U.S. members of AIS. “The goal of the Chapter is to promote the exchange of ideas, experiences, and knowledge among scholars and professionals in the Midwest U.S. engaged in the development, management, and use of information and communications systems and technology.” We hope that IS/IT researchers in the Midwest will engage with the organization as participants in conferences and as potential leaders in driving the future of MWAIS as an organization. MWAIS can provide the forum where we can share research and teaching experiences and get helpful feedback.

It was envisioned that MWAIS would become more than an annual conference with a business meeting by allowing for other innovative collaboration opportunities. In pursuing this effort, MWAIS is hosting its first “virtual panel discussion” on Second Life on Saturday, November 17th, 2007. The event is being organized by incoming President Simha Magal and founding President Dan Power.

Finally, on behalf of the MWAIS 2008 Conference Committee and the MWAIS Executive Committee, I take great pleasure in inviting you to participate in the 2008 MWAIS annual meeting to be held in Eau Claire, Wisconsin and hosted by the University of Wisconsin – Eau Claire’s College of Business.

WE NEED YOUR INVOLVEMENT TO make MWAIS an organization that is responsive to YOUR needs while providing a regular forum for professional interaction.

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The Theory of Tailorable Technologies Design (Germonprez et al., 2007) proposes two environments in which the designer and the end-user create and recreate information systems. In the theory, two environments are presented as necessary for supporting tailorable technology. One of these environments, the reflective environment, supports the users' thinking and reflection on how an information technology could be tailored to better match ad hoc use patterns, metaphors, tasks, and sense of aesthetics. As a result, the theory treats design as phenomenological, and focuses on a value-free approach to user-technology interaction and avoids the reduction of the error term of traditional IS outcomes, such as satisfaction, performance, and efficiency. To do so, the reflective environment distinguishes between design and the ways of doing design and requires that attention be paid to the different experiences, perceptions, intentions, and goals that the user will use to recreate the design of the IS. It also aims to create a phenomenological potential for action in which the user tailors the information system and develops uses in new contexts or for new tasks (Germonprez et al., 2007). Thus the focus for design and research moves away from approaches that seek to identify variables that decrease error of standard performance measures.

Our approach also moves away from a dominant approach in systems design to over-engineer the IT artifact through a restricted set of data structures, interfaces and reporting systems, so that a limited range of work practices are allowed. By standardizing information gathering and presentation, many approach produce and re-produces error by restricting the ability of users to reflexively and skillfully adjust their practices and computing systems to support changing goals, use patterns, and tasks. Given the increased interest in adaptability and system agility, traditional requirements analysis is fraught with risks beyond incomplete specifications, limited time, and restricted participation, and may result in a freezing and restriction of organizational practices to an increasingly irrelevant past. Instead, the reflective environment in the Theory of Tailorable Technology proposes design principles that encourage tailoring the information system as an end in itself. This requires support of classes of tasks, use patterns, recognizable conventions and components, and metaphors that the end user may encounter during use.
Whether the reflective interaction between the end user and the principles in the reflective environment achieve “better” outcomes is a viable, yet secondary question. Indeed, the popular concept of ubiquitous computing embodies the provision of seamless access to a variety of services for a variety of tasks, where outcomes are not predefined but instead emerge, in a continuing process of on-going, contextualized interaction (Weiser, 1993). Thus, it is more important than ever to understand the value-free design and use processes by which technology is applied and tailored.


Today, businesses like Mutual of Omaha are asking IT to provide more agile systems. Why? Because it seems that the only thing a business can count on in the future is that change will happen. When business changes happen IT must be able to quickly adapt to meet these new business requirements. This is a tall order for systems that have been built with a traditional technology and methodologies. Whether the system has been built with a dumb terminal interface and COBOL or even a contemporary browser interface and Visual Basic .NET, the tendency has been to collect the requirements and design the system with business rules coded as a part of the system. When the business rules change, the system must change and the business calls IT to make these changes. This is when IT can be challenged to make quick changes to these legacy systems. Often the IT resources that developed the system may be involved in another project and the support team may or may not have the ability to quickly make the changes needed in the system, test the changes with the business analyst and then move it into production. This classic approach to make changes to business rules in systems is shown below in figure 1.

To achieve this business agility, companies like Mutual of Omaha are externalizing business rules, process rules, and calculations into management systems designed for easy management of these entities. This has been made possible by the rise of easy to use rule engines from vendors like Fair Isaac, Ilog, Corticon and many other vendors. Even Open Source software is beginning to use this approach. Jboss Drools is an example of an open source business rule management system.

For many applications in financial services these business rules can constitute a significant portion of the overall application. What does this move to externalizing business rules look like to the developer and business analyst? Figure 2 represents how these business rules are handled when a business rule management system is involved.
For the process shown in figure 2, changing business rules within a system moves from the IT staff and into the business. This improvement means that the business analyst who gathers the new requirements can now make the business rule changes without having to request an IT resource make the changes in application code. This can potentially reduce the overall cost of changes and the time it takes to do these changes. This approach does not mean that testing is short cut before the proposed change goes into production. New testing processes need to be established to ensure that proper testing is done before the business rules are moved to the production system.

Where are business rule engines showing up? Financial services organization like Mutual of Omaha that are involved in underwriting insurance, claims processing and banking are heavy users of systems in which rules are managed using a rule engine. Another common use of rule engines is in managing the many rules involved in complex business to consumer marketing systems such as product configuration and shopping cart applications. Think of all the rules involved in building a personal computer and shipping it to a satisfied customer. Some of these rules may simply be data in tables. However, others are much more complex rules requiring a rule engine. Another use of complex business rules is found in workflow or business process management systems. Some of the routing rules may require complex rules for assignment of work and the flow of work through a process. Major developers of enterprise resource planning systems such as Oracle and SAP and others are externalizing business rules, calculations and business processes from the core applications. The intent is to increase business agility by reducing the amount of routine changes that need to be done by IT in customizations of the systems.

What does all this mean for IT, for business analysts and for educators of IT and business analysts? IT developers and their managers need to understand that this change is coming and that the frequently changing business and process rules need to move, over time, into easier to manage business and calculation engines. Just as years ago the IT developer needed to adapt to using a relational database, they now need to adapt to using rule and calculation engines. This also means that the routine changes that IT staff has been doing will be turned over to the business analyst. The IT staff is able to focus more on other aspects of the applications such as the user interface design and systems integration of the application with other systems. IT now must become the coach for the business analyst to help them make smart, quick changes in the business rules. This means increasing collaboration between the IT developer and the business analyst. As with any good coach, the IT staff needs to resist “doing the changes for the business analysts”. They need to show the BA how to make the changes and then test the changes. These new coaching and collaboration responsibilities should become measured objectives for developers and engineers working on projects and in support teams. Training may be needed to support these new responsibilities.

The business analyst role is also changing in this new world of rule and calculation engines and business process engines. The business analyst will increasingly be empowered to make changes to the frequently changing business rules and calculations in systems. They may be setting up and testing new products in the systems. Once the testing has occurred, the business analysts will move the rules into production. Where in the past, the business analysts wrote specifications for the IT developer to make changes to the system, today the business analyst needs to be trained on how to make changes in rule, calculation and process engines.
They also need to learn how to move these changes from integration, to customer acceptance and into production. Figure 3 illustrates the new collaboration between the business analyst and the IT developers. The business analyst and IT develop work together to ensure that the business and process rules and calculations are changed quickly and efficiently using a managed approach.

![Figure 3: IT and the Business Analysts Working Together](image)

What does this mean for educators of MIS and computer science students? The business analysts moving into these new roles need new skills in the development and testing of business and process rules and system calculations. The IT professional needs to understand how to work with rule management systems and business process management systems that are becoming embedded within major applications today. The IT professional also need to understand that part of their job responsibilities in the future will be to be a coach and partner with business analyst that are making many of the routine changes in systems in the future.
University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire

Mid-American Journal of Business Special Issue based on 1st Annual MWAIS Conference (2006)

From the papers accepted for presentation at the 1st Annual MWAIS conference, 4 were invited to submit expanded versions for a fast-tracking opportunity with the Mid-American Journal of Business.

e-Service Journal Special Issue based on the 2nd Annual MWAIS Conference (2007)

Editor-in-Chief, Ilze Zigurs, has agreed to work with MWAIS in fast-tracking selected best papers from the 2nd Annual MWAIS Conference in 2007. Authors with topics of relevance to e-Service Journal will be invited to be part of the special issue. The journal covers a broad range of topics related to electronic services. For details, see the home page at http://www.e-sj.org/ or contact Ilze Zigurs at izigurs@mail.unomaha.edu.

MWAIS Sponsors

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