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# Assessing Research Projects: A Framework

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### 1 Introduction

In the day-to-day life of researchers, they are constantly faced with new research opportunities. At a first glance it is not always clear whether an idea can be put into real-world research. A researcher has to select the most suitable ideas for his personal research. A suitable tool is required that helps to decide whether a research idea has the potential to contribute to close a research gap and to academic and/or practical knowledge. Challenges and possible problems have to be uncovered in an early stage, ideally before starting the research. Additionally, further aspects have to be considered, such as hypotheses, goals and potential methods. Not only the assessment of own ideas but also of those from other researchers requires a compressed overview. A short summary of the rough research idea should enable an early assessment whether the research approach is promising. This is similar to the situation of company founders or investors who have to identify the best ideas from many business opportunities.

The "Business Model Canvas" by Osterwalder et al. (2010) is often used for evaluating business models. The works of Latham (2016) as well as Nagle and Sammon (2016) have already shown that it is also possible to develop a canvas for research. As Nagle and Sammon (2016) have already described, such a framework is similar to "Design Thinking" and "Visual Thinking" (Ware 2010) methods as they visualize ideas and enable collaboration on them. Nagle and Sammon (2016) focus on the application of a research canvas in the design science environment. On the other hand, Latham's research canvas aims to be universally valid. He divides his canvas into the parts foundation and method. When applying the research canvas to assess ideas for own ideas and publications, we have missed aspects in both models. We think that an examination of the problems and risks that can arise in a research design should also emerge from the framework. This leads us to the research question of this paper:

*RQ: How does a framework for assessing research ideas look like?* We developed our framework in different steps. We analysed existing literature and frameworks in the field of research idea evaluation. Based on this, in combination with our own experiences of important aspects, we designed a first prototype of a framework. We and further participants tested this prototype. Through tests and focus group discussions the prototype was improved and led to the final framework.

The paper is organized as follows: Chapter 2 presents existing literature concerning frameworks for evaluating and assessing research approaches. It is followed by the development of an own framework. The results are discussed in the fourth chapter. The paper closes with conclusions in chapter 5.

### 2 Related Literature

To get a comprehensive overview of existing literature dealing with frameworks for assessing research ideas, a systematic literature review was conducted. In order to ensure a structured search process, the following three search terms were predefined:

- "Evaluating research"
- "Presenting research"
- "Research canvas"

As representative for an academic database in the field of information systems, we chose "AISeL". This database includes peer-reviewed papers from different high ranked journals and conference proceedings. "Google Scholar" was used to include research from all research disciplines. In this way, potential articles that are not assigned to the information systems research can also be found. As already explained, the aim of this paper is to develop a framework that is useful in practice for researchers. Google Scholar also helps here, because it includes also non-academic publications such as whitepapers and book chapters.

The objective of research is to contribute to academic and/or practical knowledge (Hassan et al. 2013). To reach this, gaps that are promising for future research have to be identified (Müller-Bloch and Kranz 2015). Important publications in the research field should be identified as well as definitions of key terms should be determined. Based on this, research questions can be formulated and the objective of research can be clarified (Wang et al. 2010). To be able to do this in a structured way, a framework is helpful. Fulfilling this purpose, two different frameworks are identified from literature, Latham (2016) and Nagle and Sammon (2016).

Latham (2016) developed a framework called "Research Cancas", to design and structure research ideas. The framework aims at general applicability and comes from an application in the social sciences. The Research Canvas is divided into two big blocks: Foundation and methodology. The foundation consists of the areas: Problem, purpose, research question/hypotheses and the conceptual framework. The methodology block consists of a literature review, an overview of how research questions should be "approached", the data collection, the data analysis and the last block in which conclusions are to be drawn. Further, Latham shows interdependencies and connections of the individual areas of the model. The framework aims to show a research process from the problem formulation to the problem solution. This is only a suggestion and the research process can include several iterations or jump over some steps.

A framework by Nagle and Sammon (2016) is called "Design Research Canvas" and focuses on design research approaches. This means that quantitative research, for example, cannot be mapped optimally. The aim is to support the connection between practitioners and researchers as described by Hevner et al. (2004). The model itself is even developed in a design research process. The framework is devided into four different aspects which are "problem", "impact", "design & build" and "evaluation". The

practical and scientific aspects of each aspect is examined. So, there is a concentration on the cooperation between practitioners and researchers. Two of the five considered aspects deal with the impact of research. On the one hand it is viewed on the research idea from a practical perspective. It is intended that the practical impact should be evaluated. On the other hand, the academic impact has to be determined, coming from a researcher's perspective. Continuing the two different perspectives, three further aspects are considered in the framework, namely problem, design and build as well as evaluation. Nagle and Sammon emphasize that iterations are very important in design research. That is why they recommend to adapt the framework in each iteration of the research approach development process.

In order to be able to assess research ideas, the problems and risks that can arise in carrying out research play a major role for us. Not only the possible impact should be considered but also potential risks. The presented frameworks from Latham (2016) as well as from Nagle and Sammon (2016) do not consider this at all or only secondary. Therefore, we developed a framework to assess research ideas that does also focus on potential limitations, the planned time for each phase of the research and the risks in the different phases.

## 3 The Developed Framework

The framework that we developed to assess research ideas consists of six main blocks. The first four blocks help to locate the research idea in its context. The last block consists of in total five sub-blocks. In this, it is focused on the research design and approach. Our framework is based on the work by Latham (2016) in the first blocks. The first one has the heading "problem identification". In this part the research problem should be specified. This can be both a practical or an academic problem. Afterwards, two different processing sequences are conceivable. One possibility is to first define the goal of the research based on the problem. This refers to a description of a goal regardless of existing research. It leads to the box "related articles" which is based on the block "literature review" by Latham (2016). Here, first papers can be mentioned that serve as a foundation or follow a similar idea. The mentioned literature may also show that only a certain aspect of the goal has not yet been researched. Based on the review of the existing literature, the hypotheses and/or the research questions of the planned research can be described. This also represents the research gap and completes the first part of our framework. It is also conceivable to describe similar studies directly after defining the problem. Coming from existing literature in the research field, goals and research questions/hypotheses arise. Which way is more suitable for the resepective idea has to be determined individually.

The second part of the framework describes the research design. First of all, there is space to mention the basis of the research design (e.g. Design Science Research). The block also contains the sub-blocks "risks", "phases/methods" and the time required for the conduction of the research. The phases/methods block lists the scientific

methods which should be used in the presented research. For example, "literature review", "expert interviews" or "survey" is entered here. The block "risks" shows which problems might arise with each method or in each phase. For example, a risk could be that not enough participants are found for a survey. The scheduled time for each phase/method is entered in the block "time". It can be checked whether the planned time is sufficient for the execution of the respective method/research phase.

The framework is arranged in such a way that both the risks and the expected duration can be assigned to the different phases. The separation into single phases in the research design block is adapted from the framework presented by Nagle and Sammon (2016). However, we enrich it through the risks, the planned time and the limitations of the respective research. The limitations will then describe what cannot be treated in the described research project. By presenting the risks and the planned time in one line with the individual phases of the research, it is possible to see more quickly where problems might occur and whether the time is sufficient or not.

Figure 1 shows the final framework.

## 4 Discussion

The framework proved to be very helpful in the first tests when using the framework for bachelor and master theses of students. Additionally, focus group discussions with testers of the developed framework led to further findings. In the first version, the framework had even more boxes which caused confusion among some students, as the delimitation of the boxes were much more difficult. It was also important for the students to know if and how they have to follow a certain order when completing the form. As supervisors of the work, we found that it is important for us to quickly identify which research design and methods should be used, also in order to assess the risks of the application.

We find it very helpful to divide the framework into two parts. This is similar to the design by Latham (2016). However, the two parts have very different focuses. Latham (2016) assumes a fixed sequence of research, which can be described as follows: Literature review, overall approach, data collection, data analysis and finally drawing conclusions. We do not consider this structure to be flexible enough. In addition, we believe it is important that the risks are also taken into account at every stage of research. For each method it should be checked whether it can lead to valid results or whether it could be problematic. Compared to Nagle and Sammon (2016), we have detached from a particular information systems research design. With the developed framework, behavioural as well as design-oriented research can be presented. The appendix contains two examples of filled out frameworks. They show how it can be used. So far, no statements can be made about the transferability of the framework from information systems research disciplines such as the social sciences. We have only tested the framework in the information systems research environment. But this might be an interesting starting point for further research.

## Title:

| Author:                | Format:  | Dea                                      | adline: |  |  |
|------------------------|----------|--|---------|--|--|
| Problem Identification |          | <u>Goal(s)</u>                           |         |  |  |
| <u>Related Studies</u> |          | <u>Hypotheses / Research Question(s)</u> |         |  |  |
|                        | Research | h Design                                 |         |  |  |
|                        |          |  |         |  |  |
| <u>Risks</u>           | Meth     | <u>nods / Phases</u>                     | Time    |  |  |
| Limitation(s)          |          |  |         |  |  |

Figure 1. The developed research assessment framework

## **5** Conclusions

The first approaches to the evaluation of research ideas by Latham (2016) and Nagle and Sammon (2016) are already a good basis for a framework. However, we have seen room for improvement in the analysis of risks and the presentation of the research design. Our developed framework is divided into two parts. The first part describes the basis of the research. The second part is devoted to research design, limitations, the planned time, individual methods and their risks in the elaboration. During the development phase, the first tests with bachelor and master theses of students have already been incorporated into the structure of the framework. It has been shown that it is important for the students that the individual areas of the framework can be easily delimited. The maturity of the model is to be further enhanced by additional tests with students and doctoral students.

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## Appendix

#### Examples of filled out frameworks

#### A quantitative study

Research Assessment Framework

## Title: Individual Factors for using SSBI

| Author:   | Format:  | Deadline:   |  |  |  |
|---|--|---|--|--|--|
| <ul> <li>Problem Identification</li> <li>Data Quality because of Shadow BI</li> <li>Introduction of SSBI Software does not necessarily lead to an active use of SSBI tools</li> </ul>   |  | <u>Goal(s)</u> To understand what leads to the use of SSBI  |  |  |  |
| Related Studies       Hypotheses / Research Question(s)         • Işik et al. (2013)       • How do individual factors influence the intention to use SSBI and the expected success of SSBI applications?         • Daradkeh and Moh'd Al-Dwairi (2017)       • Becearch Design |  |   |  |  |  |
| Quantitative research     Structural equation modeling  |  |   |  |  |  |
| Risks         • Constructs which are not validated enough         • Not enough participants   | Met<br>Literature revi<br>Model & hypo<br>Survey develo<br>Conducting th<br>Analysis of the<br>Writing | nods / PhasesTimeew30 daystheses development10 dayspment5 dayse survey90 dayse survey30 dayse survey20 days |  |  |  |

#### Limitation(s)

• Only the individual factors that influence SSBI are considered

• Limitations of quantitative research

## Title: Literature Review in the Field of Smart Services

| Author:  | Format:   | Dea   | adline:  |  |  |
|--|-----------|---|--|--|--|
| <ul> <li>Problem Identification</li> <li>No structured overview of existing smart<br/>service literature</li> <li>No existing research agenda available</li> </ul> |           | <u>Goal(s)</u> <ul> <li>Comprehensive overview of current state of research in the field of smart services</li> <li>Identification of research gaps</li> </ul>  |  |  |  |
| <u>Related Studies</u> <ul> <li>Allmendinger and Lombreglia (2005)</li> </ul>  |           | <ul> <li>Hypotheses / Research Question(s)</li> <li>Which topics in the field of smart services in the academic literature are focused on which lifecycle phases?</li> <li>Which important research gaps are promising for further research?</li> </ul> |  |  |  |
| Structured literature review according to Well <u>Risks</u> No interesting     analysis results     Identification of     an existing     research agenda          |           | hods / Phases<br>rch<br>sategorization of literature<br>of research gaps  | Time           • 25 days           • 50 days           • 10 days |  |  |
|  | • Writing |   | • 25 days  |  |  |
| Use of predefined search terms   |           |   |  |  |  |

• Limited to eight databases

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