

EDITORIAL

Meaningful research

It is surely part of the human condition to seek relevance. “Who am I?” we ask. “What am I to make of myself?” The question of relevance is not just for the individual but also for the collective. Roseanne Murphy da Silva, President of the Actuarial Society of South Africa, during her Presidential address to the 2016 convention of the Society, asked members of the Society to strive for relevance.

We are tempted to avoid a difficult question by claiming immunity on grounds of intractability. “If the path to finding the answer is too difficult,” our reasoning goes, “then it is surely not a productive use of our time to seek that answer.” We know in this case that we are avoiding the issue. The journey to a difficult answer is more valuable than the apparently unreachable destination.

We might instead think that relevance is akin to humility. “The more you think you’ve arrived,” the argument this time follows, “the further you are from it.” That too is a convenient tactic of avoidance.

In truth, we know it when we see it. We recognise when somebody is making a difference. And every now and again, we are privileged enough to experience it within ourselves. We find meaning. We have contributed to those around us. It calls out to a deep part of us. We have a glimpse of what it is to be truly satisfied.

Roseanne was not the first to call us to relevance. Many have gone before her. One such person addressed last year’s convention and we published his address in the 2015 Journal. Drawing to a close, Paul Lewis called us to action:

... I have a hypothesis that, with the input and guidance of a few people and by redirecting less than five percent of our energy, our profession could fundamentally change the way we see ourselves, and the role that we play in society. We could use our strengths to solve more and different problems than we currently do.

—Lewis, P (2015) Thoughts on Professionalism, guest editorial, *SAAJ* 15, 217

This is a call for a five-percent redirection to our research. It is not a criticism of the submissions received. Neither is it a slight on the papers published in this edition or those presented and discussed at the recent convention. It is a challenge instead to think differently,

more widely, more boldly and more carefully about the way, in Paul's words, in which we direct our energy. It asks that we contribute more generously to society, tackling the difficult issues, asking challenging questions. For example? What is the meaning of 'decolonisation' as applied to our education system? What does it mean to be African?

"But we're good at research," you say. Are we? We are led to believe that we are. We have been equipped with an excellent set of skills. We have talent at collecting and analysing data. We use it to form models of the world around us. We observe our environment and synthesise it into these models. We test variations to our assumptions and project results into the future to draw conclusions about optimal actions in the present. We're good.

Are we? Our models are generally linear in nature, consisting of intrinsically simple relationships between variables. We call them stochastic, but frequently limit our analysis to multiple deterministic projections and are impressed by the show of variation that convinces us we are getting to grips with uncertainty. I fear that we are frequently scratching the surface. Worse, we fool ourselves with our pretence at sophistication. Our dependence on our models is intrinsically dangerous. Our simplifying assumptions too often render the model irrelevant to the purposes to which it needs to be put. We seldom account in any helpful way for the most prevalent, most important, most critical of all variables, human behaviour.

Our models claim to allow for behavioural variation. This too is intrinsically deterministic. We assume perfect saving patterns or simple one-off decisions or events. We combine two or three of these and claim that the compromise on reality is not material. We are barely scratching the surface. We risk finding ourselves in a bare room in which life's richness and diversity has completely escaped us.

"But human behaviour is difficult." I agree. Human behaviour, however, is not a variable, a small part of the problem. Human behaviour is the problem.

At the heart of our crisis is that we don't ask our customers, or those we serve. We would if we could, but we probably don't know how to. We have grown so accustomed to our sterile environment that we believe that we understand them and then we model them like stick-men and -women going about a life that does not exist. Our models are too simple. So are our paradigms.

While we, in moments of honesty, consider it impossible to ask our customers, others are going ahead. We even know who they are. Taxis take people places. Holiday businesses know where we would like to go and what we most wish to do. Mapping software correctly predicts our destinations and tells us how to get there and what to do on the way. Supermarkets know much more about the health of our customers than we do. Stokvels and burial societies know what they want and what they aspire to. These entities don't even build models. They don't make assumptions. They use what they have and what they gather.

Surely it is just a matter of time before they take our customers away from us and we lose all relevance? We might not even recognise how far ahead of us they are when they do so.

Please, let us begin to consider the challenges that really matter. Let us apply our skills to issues that would help us to make a difference. Let us strive in our research for relevance. For a start, we might ask, in the quest to understand our customers, what does it mean to be African?



Alert members of the Society will recall my invitation to the community to apply for the position of editor of this Journal. I have received no responses to the invitation. I am happy to continue to serve in the position, unless asked to step down of course, but I believe that we need to work to understand better the evolving publication context, particularly online, in which any journal finds itself. The Journal requires specific skills in this regard. Any offers of assistance would be most gratefully considered, as would any applications for the position of editor.