Leaders share insights into IT challenges

Dr Rennie Naidoo and Prof Awie Leonard

The Department of Informatics launched its inaugural Information Technology (IT) Management Symposium on 23 May 2013. The theme of the symposium was "IT management: Future challenges and opportunities". The one-day symposium focused on IT management topics relevant to South Africa.

One of the key objectives of the symposium was to intensify cooperative education between academics and practitioners in the field of IT management. The goal was to create a platform for IT managers, academic staff and students to collaborate with each other. The speakers included respected IT leaders, educators and PhD students. Mr Trent Rossini, General Dr Matie du Toit, Dr Peter Tobin and Mr Justy Range provided insights that provoked a lively discussion among the audience. The symposium also gave a few PhD students the opportunity to present their proposed research topics in a poster format.

The speakers echoed the strategic importance of IT. Mr Trent Rossini spoke about the pivotal role of IT in the development of new products and services for organisations. He spoke about the myth that successful IT leaders do not require a formal education, referring to "Steve Jobs and Bill Gates, as outliers".

General Dr Matie du Toit focused more on the organisational challenges of the IT environment. He alluded to the importance of IT meeting its governance and compliance obligations. He insisted that aspects of risk and the value elements of IT are carefully considered by IT leaders.

Both keynote addresses touched on the importance of IT having closer relationships with business.

Mr Justy Range, a PhD candidate, provided some interesting insights into the importance of trust in the use of self-service technologies in the fresh produce market. He characterised the fresh produce market as one that relied on trust, given the almost informal arrangements between suppliers and retailers in the past. He discussed the intricacies involved in delegating and maintaining this kind of trust.

The posters presented by four other PhD students effectively promoted collaborative thinking and analysis. The topics covered were diverse – from IT project organising, business process management and enterprise resource planning (ERP) implementations to policy-making.

Ms Tendani Mawela facilitated a lively discussion where students had the opportunity to air their views about the major themes discussed by the key-note speakers. Dr Peter Tobin provided some useful direction for the road ahead. He spoke about the impact that the Indian and Chinese IT industry may have on local IT practitioners.

Dr Rennie Naidoo, a member of the organising committee, pointed out that it was apparent that IT leaders will be entering a world about which little is known. Strangely, it may be our ability to unlearn, rather than rely on old models, that may decide if an IT leader will be effective in the future.

He urged students to be proud about the skills that they learn at University, as it provides them with a distinctive advantage in coping with people and technology matters in organisations.

Prof Awie Leonard, the lead organiser of the event, was impressed by the turnout from the business community and graduate students, and is keen to turn this forum into a regular biannual event. "One of the key challenges for educators is to develop IT managers that are comfortable with interacting with people and using IT to create value for their organisations instead of only immersing themselves in technological matters," he said.

The Department of Informatics hopes that the IT Management Symposium will soon earn the reputation as being an effective approach to improving collaboration between practitioner organisations, students and staff.