From Vision to Reality: 
The Formation of the Association for Information Systems and the 
Volunteers Who Made it Happen

The storied history of the Association for Information Systems (AIS) is one that goes back further than many realize. The organization’s history didn’t begin the day the ink was dry on its constitution or at the formation of the first Information Systems (IS) conference, or when the first stand-alone IS program in a university was created. Perhaps this is best reflected by Gordon Davis, IS trailblazer, who stated: “I [am] reminded of many pioneers who were there in the beginning. But the beginning was not in a day. It emerged as the early pioneers began to see a coherent body of knowledge in information systems and began to build the societies and journals that we have today. I cannot tell you who was “first,” but I can tell you that many interesting, dedicated people were in the first wave.”

In the late 1970s and early 1980s as the field of IS grew in popularity among researchers and students, the need for a centralized organization that could represent the professional values and aspirations of those in IS, which differed from those of faculty in computer and information science fields.

The first major effort made toward creating a centralized event was the creation of the Conference on Information Systems, later known as the International Conference on Information Systems, or ICIS.

For more than a decade, the conference continued to grow as it was held annually in cities across the United States. In 1990 the conference truly lived up to its name as an international effort as it was held in Copenhagen, Denmark.

As ICIS grew and prospered, many IS pioneers began to use the venue as an opportunity to create cohorts of peers to study the feasibility of an organization that would properly represent the entire field of IS. Over the years, studies were conducted with undefined outcomes, resulting in little action.

The Feasibility of a Professional IS Organization

In 1992, Dr. William R. King, Professor at the University of Pittsburgh was tasked with organizing a group to comprehensively study the issue of creating a professional organization.

“I realized that the success of such an organization would not be determined by a random set of members, but rather by the field's leaders, who the rest would follow,” said King in a 2014 interview. “So, when I was asked to study the matter, I phoned about 40 of the leading IS academics to get their ideas. I found that all but one or two saw the need and indicated that they would enthusiastically support an IS professional organization. With such strong support, I concluded that further study was unnecessary and formed an Organizing Committee consisting of leaders from around the globe.”
Knowing there was overwhelming support backing the idea of a formal organization, King formed an organizing committee made up of senior academics from around the globe. Conducted an electronic constitutional convention to agree on a constitution for the new organization and thus the Association for Information Systems (AIS) was born.

AIS set forth a clear mission: to serve society by fostering the advancement of knowledge and promoting excellence in the research, teaching, practice, and study of information systems on a global scale.

Using funds from King’s own personal professional development budget, a seed money gift provided by Ted Stohr, then of New York University, and the volunteer labor of King’s office staff and several doctoral students, the vision for the organization came to fruition.

“The Organizing Committee designed the organization using e-mail, dealing issue-by-issue on a 48-hour cyclical basis,” said King. “I traveled to numerous conferences where I held ad hoc informational meetings in which I told attendees what we were doing and solicited their ideas. The meetings were very well attended. Six months after the formal start of AIS, we had over 1,800 Charter Members and about 3,000 within a year.”

The Early Leaders of AIS

After the official formation of the organization a nominating committee nominated people to serve as officers and council members and these charter members elected the first leadership teams of AIS. It was the work of this first wave of elected volunteers who helped set the foundation for the association’s success.

King served as the first president (1994-1995) and executive director. During his tenure, he negotiated cooperative agreements with several journals and international conferences.

Niels Bjørn-Andersen became president of AIS in 1996 as the first non-US president. He had a strong vision of creating a truly global organization instead of a predominantly US-based organization with an extended network. He also worked to help IS academics from developing countries through providing low cost memberships.

Ron Weber was the first president of AIS from Region 3 (Pacific/Asia). He worked with Gordon Davis (4th President of AIS) to establish the Journal of the Association for Information Systems and the Communications of the Association for Information Systems. He also spear-headed the support of a new business office through Georgia State University, where AIS is still sponsored today.
Much of the complexity that comes with building a global association happened during the
tenure of fourth AIS president, Gordon Davis. In addition to creating alliances with existing
related organizations, Davis finalized merger negotiations between ICIS and AIS.

Blake Ives, who later became the seventh president of AIS, built one of the first connectors for
IS scholars from around the globe with the creation of the ISWorld ListServ. Ives merged
ISWorld with AIS as a strategic initiative to integrate various technology operations.

The story of AIS is not just about a singular founding moment, but rather a culmination of efforts
by dedicated pioneers over a period of time. From the initial recognition of a need for a
centralized IS organization to the tireless work of volunteers like King, Davis, Gray, Bjørn-
Andersen and countless others, AIS has become a cornerstone for the advancement of the
information systems field. The early leadership, with their diverse perspectives and focus on
global reach, laid the foundation for the thriving association we see today.

*The next article on the history of AIS will cover the early days of IS research and the journals
that have helped a generation of scholars better serve society.*

Sources:
https://ishistory.aisnet.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/Association_for_Information_Systems-
History-2014.pdf
https://aisel.aisnet.org/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1604&context=jais