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Business Leaders Get It.

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Former University of Washington 'Library School' expands focus on business

Puget Sound Business Journal (Seattle) - by [Cynthia Flash](#) Contributing Writer

Baby boomer executives at companies such as **Washington Mutual Inc.** and **Parsons Brinckerhoff** worried about the new employees they were hiring.

How could these 20-somethings get their work done when they were distracted by instant messaging, listening to their iPods and socializing with others online?

These companies turned to the University of Washington's Information School. Known as the "iSchool," this UW unit started as the Library School in 1911 and has evolved into one of the nation's leading campus programs tackling the relationship between information, technology and people -- often in close collaboration with the business world.

"Information is the asset for entrepreneurship building," said iSchool Dean Harry Bruce. "I believe that many businesses are either losing money, losing productivity with their workers, or failing to exploit opportunities -- and the business is running with an element of risk because information is being mismanaged or its value is being ignored for the organization."

Provocative words for businesses navigating this information age.

The iSchool is reaching out to businesses in several ways. Its **Center for Information Assurance and Cybersecurity** researches security vulnerabilities inherent in technology. The Keeping Found Things Found project has produced two books designed to help businesses and individuals manage their overabundance of information.

Other business-related issues the iSchool is tackling include:

- How do internet users distinguish between useful search results and internet white noise?
- How can the technology interfaces encountered every day be made more accessible and easier to use?
- How can tasks that require large amounts of information be made less stressful and easier to accomplish?

These are questions answered by students trained to look at technology from a user's perspective and figure out how it affects lives.

Information School students leave the UW with one of four degrees: a bachelor of science in informatics, a master's of library science, a master's of information management or a doctorate in information science. And -- though the iSchool is far less-known in downtown corporate suites than the business school in another part of campus -- iSchool grads are entering the work force as experts in how to manage the deluge of information that bombards employees and their companies every day.

The iSchool's Institute for Innovation in Information Management (I3M) is an organization of member companies that fund the school's research into information management and how people use information and technology. Last year, I3M studied how baby boomers work with the generation that grew up with computers, the so-called "digital natives."



Photo: Dan Schlatter

Tackling business-related problems at the UW Information School are, from left, Robert Mason, professor and associate dean for research; Assistant Professor Karine Barzilai-Nahon, and graduate student Nancy Lou.

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iSchool professor Robert Mason, one of three researchers on the "Millennial Generation Study," said that these digital natives use technology and share information differently from previous generations. Yet these younger workers are expected to move into organizations whose expectations evolved from prior generations, leading to potential tensions.

Mason and the iSchool team built upon previous research on digital natives, and updated it by asking chief information officers how they expect to manage a new crop of employees who may think differently from the ones already in place. The ongoing study, which has been presented to more than 100 CEOs, explores how organizations might deal with these problems.

While Mason and his colleagues tackle how the different generations work with technology, Professor Barbara Endicott-Popovsky, director of the Center for Information Assurance and Cybersecurity, works with companies on cutting technology risks.

In April, the iSchool will collaborate with Microsoft to bring together students for the first Pacific Rim Regional Collegiate Cyber Defense Competition. While some teams work to defend a preconfigured system of a fictitious company, other teams will attempt to hack into the system.

Formed in 2004, the Center for Information Assurance and Cybersecurity addresses the unintended negative consequence of wholeheartedly embracing the technology age: privacy breaches, cyber-stalking, protecting the vulnerabilities of computer infrastructure.

"The risk in any organization," she said, "is right at the individual employee who doesn't use his or her password, takes something home, leaves something running and doesn't turn it off."

Endicott-Popovsky said her students and the research conducted at her center are in demand.

"A university can talk about it because it's a friendly place," she said. "You can talk about problems and solve them. Our center becomes that fertile ground for cooperation. We want to be known for a real center for skills and capabilities across multiple disciplines: the law, technology, information management, business and policy."

Students obtaining master's of science information management degrees are required to work with companies or nonprofit organizations on a research or interactive design project.

Vicki Stoddard, who completed her master's in June, worked on a project for Digital Learning Commons, a nonprofit that seeks to improve access to educational materials for students and teachers. Stoddard used information science techniques to analyze data from math scores, and conducted interviews with math educators and students. The result was suggestions for ways to improve comprehension.

Susan Michl, now an international program manager at Microsoft, worked with two other students to organize a website that gives access to the Pacific Northwest Lesbian Archives, a nonprofit collecting archival materials from lesbian lives from around the Pacific Northwest for future study and historical reference.

Not every student project, however, has deep social significance. Some help promote fun.

Melissa Abbott, who graduated in June, developed a database of weather conditions, track surface, tire pressure and the like for a National Hot Rod Association drag racing team.

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