Syllabus: PhD Seminar on Models of Organizational Cognition
University of Zurich, December 2–4, 2013
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Description

The goal of this seminar is to study some of the processes by which organizations make decisions. The seminar focuses on how different micro-level processes (e.g., individual biases and organizational structure) affect macro-level outcomes that are relevant to the strategy and organizations literatures (e.g., profitability and innovation).

The research covered in this seminar builds on the seminal ideas of the Carnegie tradition. This tradition, with its focus on modeling information processing and decision making in organizations has played a fundamental role in shaping the strategy and organizations fields: concepts such as bounded rationality, exploration/exploitation, organization design, organizational learning, absorptive capacity, routines, and imperfect contracting, all core elements of strategy and organizations fields, were all developed by students of the Carnegie tradition.

Most of the research covered in this seminar can be catalogued under a “Neo-Carnegie” label: research that revisits classic questions of the original Carnegie tradition, now armed with more powerful methodological and theoretical lenses. Among the methodological improvements of the Neo-Carnegie approach, mathematical models (both computational and closed-form) play a central role, as they allow to rigorously describe and analyze central constructs of the Carnegie tradition, such as complexity, search, organizational structure, group decision making, and organizational learning. Among the theoretical improvements, the Neo-Carnegie literature extends the Carnegie tradition, by incorporating recent developments in organizational economics and cognitive science.

Objectives for the seminar

- Study the main ways in which the Neo-Carnegie research contributes to the strategy and organizations literatures.
- Become familiar with a basic set of approaches to model cognition and decision making in organizations: search models, project selection models, and models of organizational structure.
- Explore ways in which your own research may illuminate fundamental questions of the Carnegie tradition as well as ways in which Neo-Carnegie research may illuminate your work.
Requirements

Although the readings have a strong bias toward conceptual and modeling papers, it is not necessary for you to have done any modeling work in the past. The readings, which will be accompanied with short in-class tutorials, will be sufficiently self-explanatory. The only requirement of this course is for you to get actively involved with the readings and discussions.

*Paper discussion.* All the readings of the course will be evenly split among the students, so that each student will be in charge of leading the discussion of at most one reading per session.\(^1\) For each reading prepare no more than six slides (or an equivalent text outline) with the following suggested headings: (1) main question and why it matters; (2) method; (3) result; (4) implications; (5) discussion (i.e., thoughtful questions and ideas you pose to the class regarding key assumptions, problems, extensions, connections, etc.). You can add a sixth heading anywhere in the structure to delve into further detail about any other aspect of the paper you consider particularly relevant. Please bring to class enough printouts of this document for all the participants (if you prepare slides, print at two slides per page). Also, please upload this document to our shared folder before the beginning of the corresponding session.

*Presentation of your research.* At the end of each session, one or two students will present a 10-minute summary of their work, and then as a group we will explore ways in which this research can contribute to the Neo-Carnegie literature and how this literature can contribute to the student’s research. The goals of this group exercise are to explore new research opportunities as well as to discuss alternative framings that may increase the appeal of your paper.

How to Apply

To apply to this course, please email me (fcsaszar@umich.edu) no later than November 5, 2013, including a one-page summary of your research interests (I will use this to match students to discussion topics). Attendance is limited to 10 participants. Priority will be given in a first-come, first-served base. If you have any questions regarding accommodations in Zurich, please email Dirk Martignoni (dirk.martignoni@business.uzh.ch).

Grading

Your final grade for this seminar will be computed using the following weights:

- Class participation 50%
- Paper discussions 50%

\(^1\)I will assign the readings for session #1, for all the other sessions, you are in charge of assigning the readings among yourselves. The readings will be available in a shared folder by November 12.
Reading List

Note: for each session, all the readings are required, except those that appear below a horizontal bar, which are optional.

Session 1: Organizational Structure and Group Decision Making

[Monday, December 2, 9:00am–noon]


Session 2: Cognition in Organizations (I)

[Monday, December 2, 1:30pm–4:30pm]


Session 3: Cognition in Organizations (II)

[Tuesday, December 3, 9:00am–noon]


Session 4: Perspectives

[Tuesday, December 3, 1:30pm–4:30pm]


Session 5: Knowledge and Learning

[Wednesday, December 4, 9:00am–noon]


**Session 6: Organizations as Interdependent Systems**

*[Wednesday, December 4, 1:30pm–4:30pm]*


