

New Effort to Tap Technology to Aid the Service Economy

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A group of large technology companies, universities and professional associations are creating a new organization to support and promote research into ways that technology can increase productivity and innovation in the economy's service sector.

The creation of the organization, the Service Research and Innovation Initiative, will be officially announced today. It represents the latest step by technology companies and some universities to promote an emerging field that is being called "service science."

The early academic programs are a blend of computing, social sciences, engineering and management. The aim of service science is to try to improve productivity and accelerate the development of new offerings in services, which account for about 80 percent of the United States economy and similarly large shares of other Western economies.

In the last couple of years, more than three dozen universities in several countries have added service science courses, and the National Science Foundation has begun financing a few service research projects.

Among corporations, I.B.M. has been a leader in promoting service science programs in universities, and it has reoriented its own research laboratories to focus more on services.

"We need a professional organization to help promote service science," said James C. Spohrer, director of service research at the I.B.M. Almaden Research Center in San Jose, Calif. "It is one of the seed crystals around which the new discipline will form."

I.B.M. and Oracle are founding corporate members of the Service Research and Innovation Initiative. Other company members of the organization's advisory board include Accenture, Cisco, Computer Sciences, EMC, Hewlett-Packard, Microsoft and Xerox.

Researchers from several universities are also members, including some from the University of California, Los Angeles; the Wharton School at the University of Pennsylvania; and Arizona State University. The European Commission and a German research organization, the Fraunhofer Institute, are also members of the advisory committee.

The new initiative is backed by two professional societies, the Technology Professional Services Association and the Service and Support Professionals Association. The executive director of the new organization, Thomas W. Pridham, is the senior vice president for advanced programs of the service and support professionals group.

J. B. Wood, the chief executive of both the longstanding professional groups, said the purpose of the new effort was to have a neutral, nonprofit professional organization around which to build a community of common interest. "The investment in research by companies and the government has driven so much innovation on the hardware side of information technology," Mr. Wood said. "We think there is a similar opportunity in services."

The new organization, according to Mr. Pridham, will provide a forum for collaboration to help set research priorities, pool corporate funds to support academic programs, and advise the government on preferred targets of basic research. It will hold a symposium on service research on May 30 in Santa Clara, Calif.

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