Experience and related concepts such as organizational tenure have been extensively researched in a variety of disciplines, such as human resources, counseling, entrepreneurship and venture capital. Within the information systems literature, the experience construct is regularly employed to categorize subjects as well as to explain differences in training, amongst other treatment outcomes. Despite regularly appearing in both the academic and practitioner realms, the theoretical development of this construct has received very little attention. For instance, it is a common occurrence in job advertisements — asking prospective candidates to possess a certain amount of work experience, generally measured in years — to qualify for a position. Many professional disciplines incorporate an experience requirement into their licensing practices, such as counseling psychology, public accounting, and real estate brokering, among others. Following the applied community’s generally accepted practice of measuring experience in terms of years of education, service, or tenure, the research community often operationalizes the construct in a similar manner assuming a linear relationship, suggesting more is better than less. The purpose of this paper is to explore the use of the experience construct in IS research, to offer alternative conceptualizations, and to suggest that commonly accepted practices may result in misuse of the construct and possible misinterpretation of results obtained in conjunction with its use.

The notion of experience can be employed as a descriptor (e.g. ‘years of experience for the subject sample ranged from X to Y, with a mean of Z’), as a selector condition (e.g. ‘only practitioners with a minimum of X years of experience were invited to participate in this research’), or as part of a research model (e.g. ‘increases in experience positively affect dependent variable X’), or any combination of these. The experience construct, however, has rarely been explicitly defined, leading to a number of actual and potential problems following from its usage. In particular, this paper seeks to address the multiple issues stemming from a lack of conceptualization of the experience construct (see table below).

This paper will review each these facets of experience in light of relevant theory and develop a set of recommendations for more effective conduct of future research involving this construct.
The postulation of a simple experience-performance relationship can lead to equivocal results.

The direction of causality in such a relationship is suspect.

Experience can be best conceptualized as a formative construct, with time or tenure as one of many indicators.

When using either time or a quantitative measure of exposure as indicators of experience, the mode and level of measurement has a significant impact on the strength, and potentially the existence, of a detectable relationship.

The relationship between time, as a common proxy for experience, and performance is far more complex than is commonly assumed, including a host of other relevant factors; even if properly conceptualized, experience is a distal predictor of performance.

The form of the relationship between time and experience is assumed to be linear, which is one of many possibilities, and not the most likely.

The purpose of this paper was to identify and discuss issues related to the use, and possible mis-use, of the experience construct in IS research. To this end, we discuss some potential avenues for further consideration, as they relate to using of the experience construct as either a dependent or independent effect. Experience as an outcome can be investigated by focusing on either the process by which exposure to varying events or occurrences is generated, or on the process by which those are translated into experience gains. Alternatively, focus could be placed on the individual and contextual factors that either promote or hinder the transformation of exposure to an event into some form of experience gain.

Although a rich literature exists on learning processes we are not aware of a comprehensive conceptualization of the process mediating between exposure and experience gains that synthesizes past empirical results and highlights under-researched areas. While many of the relevant factors are likely to be generalizable across disciplines and professions, empirical investigations into which ones are more or less relevant for activities dealing with the development, implementation, or use of technologies appears to be a worthwhile pursuit.

On the other hand, interest on aspects of experience could arise from its important role as an antecedent to other outcomes of interest, such as knowledge, skills, and attitudes. In particular, research could focus on the processes by which different gains from experience result in one or more of these outcomes, or whether the type of experience and the type of outcome are related (e.g. certain types of experiences results in certain types of outcomes). In light of the issues highlighted in this manuscript, attempts to use experience as a direct predictor of performance may result in weak or equivocal relationships, given that the former is argued to be a distal predictor of the latter. If the interest is on explaining task performance, then positioning knowledge, skills, or self-efficacy as direct antecedents is more likely to result in improved explanatory power.

Examples from a wide variety of disciplines suggest the experience construct to be valuable in our research and in need of a more critical conceptualization than has been previously performed. We hope the issues brought forth in this discourse will serve to both inform and improve future research using the experience construct.