

## WHY HR PRACTICES ARE NOT EVIDENCE-BASED

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The difference between the academic literature and the practitioner literature on human resource management is an indicator and one cause of the major separation that exists between research and practice in human resource management. A great deal of what passes as “best practice” in HRM most likely is not. In some cases, there is simply no evidence that validates what are thought to be best practices, while in other cases there is evidence to suggest that what are thought to be best practices are inferior practices. In short, most organizations do not practice evidence-based human resource management. As a result, they often underperform with respect to their key stakeholders: employees, investors, and the community.

There is no easy or simple way to reduce the separation between research and practice. As the result of multiple realities, we are in a world in which decision makers in organizations are not aware of, and therefore, are not influenced by much of the research that has been done in the area of human resource management. This is the result both of the type of research that is being done and where it is published. Lack of knowledge is not the only cause of the gap between research and practice. Even where research results are known and have clear implications for practice, they may not impact practice because they run counter to what practitioners prefer to do or believe is right (when it comes to people, everyone is an expert!). A brief review of the major forces that work against evidence-based (human resource) management (EBM) will serve to illustrate why it is so difficult to get organizations to practice EBM and to suggest some changes that might increase the degree to which EBM is practiced.

### WHY A SEPARATION BETWEEN HRM RESEARCH AND PRACTICE?

#### Publications Are Not Evidence-Based

The Rynes, Giluk, and Brown article does a very convincing job of demonstrating just how separate the worlds of academic and practitioner publications are with respect to three content areas. I think the same results would have appeared if any of the major research areas in organizational behavior had been studied. As a result of the separation between

academic and practitioner publications, much of the research done by academics is not visible to practitioners. There is no question that publications like *HR Magazine* could, and perhaps should, spend more time on research evidence; they could, for example, focus more on underutilized research knowledge.

But the reality is that the leading HR magazines and newsletters are written by journalists who are asked to report on current events and their impact on human resource management. New research findings represent only a small portion of the changes in the world that HR executives “need” to be aware of. Well-established research findings are hardly the kind of “news” that magazines tend to focus on. Indeed, the fact that a finding is well known (even if it is only among academics) almost automatically makes it uninteresting to the people who write and edit news publications. The three issues studied by Rynes, Giluk, and Brown are “old” news. Yes, research on them continues, but it is largely research that focuses on refinements, not on the kinds of discoveries that can guide practice.

Most jobs in HR are largely transactional. The reason for this is rather straightforward: many of the day-to-day activities in the HR departments of organizations are administrative and do not involve the utilization of scientific knowledge (Lawler, Boudreau, & Mohrman, 2006). Employees have to be paid, their benefits have to be managed, training programs have to be run, and a host of other administrative activities have to be done. These activities end up dominating the agendas of HR departments.

The development of new information technology-based HR systems is changing the type of work HR departments do, but when all is said and done, the vast majority of individuals in HR functions are not in a position to practice a great deal of EBM in their day-to-day work lives (Lawler, Ulrich, Fitzenz, & Madden, 2004). Thus, it is hardly surprising that publications directed to them do not have a great deal of content that educates them about the major research findings in human resource management.

In summary, it is hardly surprising that the most visible HR practitioner publications do not cover most of the well-established research findings in

human resource management. This situation is unlikely to change, given the pressures for circulation that these magazines face and the desire of most HR practitioners to read about the latest events, nor perhaps should it.

### **Education and Training in HR Are Lacking**

A strong case can be made that research findings in HR should be known by HR practitioners as a result of their education and training. Unfortunately, many HR practitioners lack any formal education in organizational behavior and human resources management. HR is very much an emerging profession and, as a result, it struggles to define a body of knowledge that every practitioner should know. Only recently have certification programs for the body of knowledge that HR professionals need to know been developed. The identification of HR competencies has come a long way thanks to the efforts of the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM), the publisher of *HR Magazine*, but the field has a long way to go before it will be dominated by well-trained professionals (Grossman, 2007).

No one knows exactly how many HR practitioners there are in the United States, but there are at least double the more than 200,000 individuals who are members of SHRM. Less than half the members of SHRM have earned one of the organization's certificates, an achievement partially based on acquiring the kind of knowledge that is needed to practice EBM. Many individuals stay in HR for only a short time. They do not consider themselves to be professionals in HR management, nor do they have professional knowledge. SHRM has a year-to-year member retention rate of about 80 percent, in part because many people spend only a short period in the HR function.

### **Senior HR Executives Are Not Professionals**

The senior managers in HR who make HR system design decisions are potentially the major market for research that leads to EBM. They design systems and make decisions that in many cases can and should be informed by research. These jobs are sometimes filled with professionals who have advanced degrees in psychology or human resource management, but often they are not. Approximately 25 percent of the senior HR positions in major U.S. corporations are filled by individuals with little or no background in HR (Lawler, Boudreau, & Mohrman, 2006). They are unlikely to have the kind of knowledge about research findings that would per-

mit them to shape the management practices of companies so that they are evidence-based.

The senior management positions in some corporations are not filled with HR professionals who have backgrounds in HR for several reasons. Perhaps the major reason is that organizations use senior HR positions for a variety of purposes, including training general managers and, unfortunately, in some cases as a place to put failed senior managers prior to their retirement or departure from the organization. All too often, organizations do not see the senior HR position as one that requires a highly trained, knowledgeable professional. Fortunately, this perception is changing as more organizations realize the importance of HR management. Thus, there is an increasing chance that senior HR jobs will be filled by individuals who will practice EBM.

Filling senior HR positions with knowledgeable HR executives is a necessary, but not sufficient, step when it comes to organizations practicing EBM. Corporations can only take this step if there is a general acceptance that practicing EBM is possible, desirable, and a potential source of competitive advantage. In other words, it requires knowledgeable managers, both in the HR function and in general management. With the increase in university-based business education, it may be that more EBM will in fact occur because non-HR managers will accept if not demand it, but this is far from certain.

### **Management Education Slight HR**

Business schools often do not provide courses that feature evidence-based HR management. As a result, managers who have gotten MBAs or bachelor's degrees in business may not be familiar with the research findings in organizational behavior and HR. Even those individuals who want to have careers in HR often do not have available to them courses that give them a good overview of the existing research, much less the kind of education that would allow them to understand research and translate it into management practice (Bennis & O'Toole, 2005; Rousseau & McCarthy, 2007). This situation may change when and if business schools see a strong market for individuals trained in evidence-based human resource management. At the present time, HR jobs tend to be relatively low paying and are not the ones that business schools are particularly interested in having their graduates placed in.

## Research Does Not Inform Practice

Last but not least, the most common types of faculty research that are done in organizational behavior and human resource management are not conducive to EBM. On the positive side, more and more research is being done in organizational behavior and human resource management, and the number of academic journals and publications continues to grow. On the negative side, much of this expanded research output from universities is unlikely to inform practice in a way that will lead to EBM. Methodological rigor continues to increase as more complex statistical analyses are performed. But a great deal of the research is focused on fine-tuning previous research and on issues that have little chance of informing and improving practice (Cummings, 2007).

What is rewarded in academia today are studies that are highly rigorous; whether they are relevant to management practice rarely seems to be an issue (Mitchell, 2007). The academic journals are full of articles that may score high on rigor and relevance to theory but all too often score poorly on informing practice. Every assistant professor at a major university knows that achieving tenure depends on having the right number of papers published in “A journals,” not on doing research that influences practice. This reality is a major contributor to the separation of the worlds of academic and practitioner publications.

The division between research and practice is solidified by the fact that most faculty members are not rewarded for publishing in practitioner journals or writing books that are directed at practice. Indeed, publishing practice-related articles and books may actually be held against them when it comes time for tenure decisions. When a researcher publishes in a practitioner journal, questions are often raised about why she or he spent time doing it and whether the research was sufficiently theoretically relevant and rigorous. The suspicion is that if it can be translated into material for a practitioner journal and has clear implications for practice, then it may not be good academic research.

Because of the type of publication pressure that faculty members face, many have stopped focusing on translating research into practice and doing research that contributes to practice. These activities are not high on their agendas. As a result, even if practitioners and practitioner publications want to learn from research, the simple fact is that the cupboard may be relatively bare when it comes to research that they can learn from.

## Research Doesn't Focus on Organizational Effectiveness

It is worth adding a final point about the type of research that is particularly likely to guide practice in human resource management. Research that focuses on showing the financial and operational consequences of different HRM practices is the type that is most likely to influence management practice (Boudreau & Ramstad, 2007). For example, rather than simply saying that a certain selection approach improves the selection process, the most useful research goes on to show that the performance of individuals who are selected by one approach is *X* percent higher than that of those selected by another and that this has a financial benefit to the company of *X* dollars. In short, useful research focuses on the organizational performance outcomes of improvements to practice. It doesn't simply say what are good practices and what are bad ones. As Rynes, Giluk, and Brown pointed out, big picture research that focuses on organizational performance often generates the most interest among practitioners, but it is rarely done.

Gathering the type of data that will influence practice usually requires field research that uses an action or evaluation research approach (Lawler, Mohrman, Mohrman, Ledford, & Cummings, 1999). Such research all too frequently is lacking in the area of human resource management and organizational behavior. This is one reason why research in HRM gets less attention than research in finance and marketing, which frequently provide data showing how practices directly impact the financial performance of firms.

## Research Is Not Done in the “Right” Place

Research that informs practice can be done in universities, but it may need to be done in centers and research institutes rather than in teaching departments. For the last 35 years of my career, I have had the good fortune to be part of two university-based research centers (ISR at the University of Michigan and CEO at the University of Southern California) that have focused on doing research that influences practice. Both have been successful because they operate very differently than academic departments. They are largely funded by grants from foundations, corporations, and the federal government, so they have to pay attention to what the customer wants. They also reward publishing in practitioner journals and give researchers the time to do field research. Overall, they have very different research environments than the ones that exist in most business schools and psychology departments.



At this point, it is important to note that the lack of academic research that is designed to guide practice has led to the proliferation of research studies by consulting firms and other for-profit enterprises. It is not surprising to me that Rynes, Giluk, and Brown found that the individuals most frequently quoted in *HR Magazine* were consultants and that more of the quantitative studies cited were done by consultants or consulting firms than by academics. Sensing a market for research that can guide practice and recognizing that academics are not meeting the need, the leading consulting firms have created their own research departments and now regularly contribute research-based pieces to practitioner journals, magazines, and newsletters. They also write books that are focused on what their research says the best practices are. The problem with their research and writing, of course, is that much of it is intended to promote the products of the consulting firms rather than to demonstrate how research can positively impact practice.

#### FUTURE TRENDS

It is much easier to identify what needs to change in order for more EBM to be practiced than it is to make it happen. If I had to choose one change that would make a difference, it would be for business schools to change their research focuses. I would not argue that they should get out of the basic research business, but I would argue that they should produce much more research and writing that focuses on practice. Business schools need to support and value (reward) research that informs practice and is visible in the publications that practitioners read. This position is highly consistent with there being professional schools that are focused on educating practitioners. Indeed, it is what medical schools currently do.

I believe that more and more practitioners are ready for EBM because of their educations, but it has to be accessible. The problem is that I do not see business schools showing significant interest in changing their approach to research. A possible stimulus for change is the 2007 draft report of the AACSB on the impact of research. It calls for business schools to encourage research that connects with the practice of management and pedagogy.

Overall, there are many reasons for believing that the worlds of academic research and human resource management practice will remain very separate. Significant change requires a considerable move toward the professionalization of the HR function, as well as a major change in the type of research valued by the major business schools. The former is perhaps more likely to happen than the latter, but neither seems to

be imminent. Thus, we are likely to continue to see academic and practitioner publications being in very separate worlds and to see organizations making decisions about HR management practices that are not research-based.

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