

EVIDENCE-BASED MANAGEMENT AND THE MARKETPLACE FOR IDEAS

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In the marketplace for ideas in the broad field of management, and in human resource management in particular, academics are jostling for position along with consultants, journalists, and practitioners. The most fundamental question that each party seeks to answer is this: “What does it take to get ahead of the competition?” Here are some possible answers from the perspectives of the various parties—answers that illustrate the range of strategies employed.

Academics take pride in using the scientific method to create new knowledge. That is, they frame questions that are testable and falsifiable with data-based results (Boudreau & Ramstad, 2007). To academics, it is a given that theory-based, empirical data published in an A-level, peer-reviewed journal constitute objective, declarative knowledge that “sells.” Major emphasis is placed on the creation of knowledge, rather than on its diffusion. Academics assume that their work will be read by other professionals, including consultants and practitioners, and that the implications for the application of their findings are obvious.

Consultants, on the other hand, often generate survey data or firm- or industry-specific studies on which to base recommendations for action. They often attempt to influence managers by conveying the depth of their experience advising clients facing similar issues. Frequently they meet face-to-face with prospective clients and, indeed, they regard “face time” as critical to their success.

Journalists tell stories in their written work. They often rely on facts and engaging anecdotes garnered from a variety of knowledgeable sources, coupled with personal experience, which might include visits and interviews with managers who then become the subjects of their stories. Journalists frequently speak at professional or trade group conferences, and their stories often carry considerable credibility. Managers sometimes generalize from these messages to the kinds of organizational problems they face, even if complete generalization is not justified. As an example, consider that it certainly simplifies things if one assumes that the world is flat, and that work can be done anytime, anywhere, via the Internet. Yet even a brief examination of the

night-time electricity grid, as displayed on Google Earth, shows vast areas of darkness in different parts of the world. Although it might be more correct to speak of the world as “spiky,” at least in terms of the availability of electricity and access to the Internet, it is more convenient to refer to the entire world as “flat” and to assume that people everywhere have Internet access.

Academics, consultants, and journalists therefore live in different “thought worlds.” Practices that academics regard as technically meritorious are sometimes not adopted for at least three reasons (Johns, 1993). One, managers frame HR practices as matters of administrative style rather than as technical innovations. As a result, they may choose technically ineffective HR interventions; they may base those choices on advice from less technically oriented advisors (e.g., non-research-oriented consultants, self-help tapes, business books); and they are more likely to adopt technical innovations than administrative ones. As a result, administrative innovation tends to lag behind technical innovation. Two, researchers often justify HR practices from a technical perspective only, ignoring important social and contextual influences that affect the adoption of innovations. Three, crises, organizational politics, competing sources of innovation, government regulations, and institutional factors often overshadow technical merit.

THOUGHT WORLDS ADRIFT

Why Don't Practitioners Know about Research That Academics Think Is Very Important?

This section of the paper explores two possible explanations for this phenomenon. One, managers need not be exposed to scientific knowledge about management to practice their craft. Two, with respect to HR management in particular, available certification tests do not strongly emphasize findings regarding tests of cognitive ability or personality, or findings regarding goal setting.

Management as a profession. Rynes, Giluk, and Brown (2007) make the incisive point that for evidence-based management (EBM) to take root, man-

agers must be exposed to, and embrace, scientific evidence. This does not always happen. Unlike medicine and law, for example, management is not truly a profession (Trank & Rynes, 2003). Specifically, there is no requirement that managers be exposed to scientific knowledge about management, pass examinations to become licensed to practice, or pursue continuing education to be allowed to maintain their practices. Moreover, comments like the following, which recently appeared in a popular business publication, do not encourage more widespread readership of academic articles: "Have you ever tried to read a research study or academic journal? They're overwritten, irrelevant, convoluted, and have poor sentence structure" (Gore, 2007: 12).

Certification tests. In the field of human resources, the Human Resource Certification Institute (HRCI) offers written examinations that enable practitioners to earn the titles "professional in human resources" (PHR), "senior professional in human resources" (SPHR), and "global professional in human resources" (GPHR). According to its Web site (www.hrci.org), HRCI certifications require professionals to demonstrate their expertise in the core principles of human resource practice and the application of those principles. More specifically, according to the Institute's 2007 *Certification Handbook* (on the Web site), the body of knowledge on which its examinations are based includes the following areas and weightings for the PHR and SPHR examinations, respectively: strategic management, 12 and 29 percent; workforce planning and employment, 26 and 17 percent; human resource development, 17 and 17 percent; total rewards, 16 and 12 percent; employee and labor relations, 22 and 18 percent; and risk management, 7 and 7 percent.

Tens of thousands of individuals have been certified at the three HRCI levels, but certification is voluntary, not mandatory. Although competency in qualitative and quantitative methods and tools for analysis, interpretation, and decision making (for example, metrics and measurements, cost-benefit analysis, financial statement analysis) is listed as part of the core knowledge for HR professionals, there is no specific assessment of those competencies as part of the certification process. To the extent that HR practitioners are deficient in knowledge of qualitative and quantitative methods, their ability to comprehend academic research is limited.

Of the three important (to academics) issues explored in Rynes et al. (2007), tests of cognitive ability and personality do appear as 1 of 23 areas of knowledge relevant to PHR and SPHR certification

within the broad area of workforce planning and employment. Likewise, goal setting appears in the HRCI's 2007 *Certification Handbook* as one of nine broad responsibilities under human resource development, specifically framed as, "Develop, implement, and evaluate performance management programs and procedures (for example, goal setting, job rotations, promotions)." However, none of the robust research results related to any of these topics appears in the Society for Human Resource Management's *SHRM Learning System Manual* (2007), which covers the body of HR knowledge included in the certification tests. In short, the body of knowledge in HR, as reflected in the test specifications for PHR and SPHR certification and in the manuals that describe that body of knowledge in detail, does not ascribe anywhere near the same level of importance to tests of cognitive ability and personality or to goal setting as do academics.

The body of knowledge is based upon periodic practice analyses, or surveys of the actual practices of the field, to ensure that exams assess the most current HR practices. Practice analyses are conducted approximately every five years, most recently in 2005. Each such analysis tries to answer the question, "What should a human resource practitioner know and be able to apply to be considered a competent HR generalist?" In 2005, the HRCI conducted a practice analysis in which a task force of 12 PHR- and SPHR-certified professionals reviewed and updated the test specifications. To provide content-oriented evidence of validity for these updated test specifications, 6,000 certified professionals completed a survey of the functional areas of HR and responsibilities that the practice analysis had identified. Survey participants assigned quantitative ratings on the following dimensions: ratings of the percentage of work time spent and importance for the functional areas, the frequency, importance, and "performed by" ratings for the responsibilities, and "importance, acquisition-technical/operational" and "acquisition-strategic/policy" for the knowledge statements.

Note that ratings of "time spent" (for the functional areas) and "frequency" (for the responsibilities) may disadvantage the area of selection, relative to areas that deal with the management of "ongoing" employees. This is most likely to occur among organizations that hire relatively infrequently, or among survey participants who are not involved with selection activities. Those same activities are precisely the ones that are most likely to involve the use of measures of cognitive ability or personality.

The results of this most recent practice analysis

were reflected in the weightings of the six functional HR areas presented earlier. The actual development of the PHR and SPHR exams was then contracted out to a third-party vendor. To the extent that editors of practitioner and bridge journals are aware of this body of knowledge, and to the extent that it influences what the editors decide to publish, it is not surprising that the three topics highlighted in Rynes et al. (2007) receive so little coverage.

Why Don't Practitioner and Bridge Journals Publish Articles on Topics That Academics Think Are Very Important?

One explanation for the sparse coverage of tests of cognitive ability and personality as well as goal setting in practitioner and bridge journals is that these topics do not relate directly to current and emerging human capital trends. Let us consider three different sources of such trends. One source is a consultancy survey, presented at the 2006 Academy of Management meetings, that identified the top five research needs of HR vice presidents as executive compensation, compensation and benefits, development of special skills, leadership development, and outsourcing (see Rynes et al., 2007). None of these areas relates directly to tests of cognitive abilities and personality or to goal setting.

A second source of emerging HR trends is the *SHRM Workplace Forecast* (Schramm, 2006), which is based on 1,232 responses to a survey of HR practitioners. The top ten trends overall were rising health care costs, increased outsourcing of jobs to other countries, threat of increased health care/medical costs to the economic competitiveness of the United States, increased demand for work-life balance, retirement of large numbers of baby boomers around the same time, new attitudes toward aging and retirement as baby boomers reach retirement age, rise in the number of individuals and families without health insurance, increase in identity theft, work intensification as employers try to increase productivity with fewer employees, and vulnerability of technology to attack or disaster. None of these areas relates directly to job performance—a primary dependent variable used by academics, and a variable for which tests of cognitive abilities and personality and of goal setting serve as predictors. Line managers may indeed care about performance, yet the list of emerging HR trends described above reflects more “distal” concerns.

A third source of information on these issues comes from a study recently commissioned by the Society for Human Resource Management Foundation (Schwind, 2007) to examine and categorize

various literatures in order to identify current and emerging human capital issues. The ten top human capital issues identified (but not ranked) were talent management, culture transformation, managing change, leadership development, HR technology, work-life programs, diversity, health care management, globalization, and ethics and ethical leadership. With the exception of talent management, none of the remaining areas relates directly to tests of cognitive abilities and personality or to goal setting.

In summary, the disconnect between the degrees of importance that academics and practitioners place on tests of cognitive abilities and personality characteristics, and goal setting, should come as little surprise for three reasons. One, management is not a profession, and therefore managers need not be exposed to scientific knowledge; two, HR certification tests do not emphasize these areas strongly; and three, these three areas do not relate directly to emerging human capital issues.

IMPLICATIONS FOR EVIDENCE-BASED MANAGEMENT

In and of itself, in my view, the sparse coverage of these topics in practitioner-oriented and bridge journals does not diminish the potential importance or impact of evidence-based management. Might practicing managers actually reject established evidence if it truly was relevant to the issues they face? Perhaps, but there is some evidence, at least in the area of training and development, that managers prefer training program evaluations that are expressed in terms of results (financial or measures of performance) to anecdotal information. This result held up regardless of the reported level of impact of the training programs (high, average, or low) (Mattson, 2003).

On the basis of an extensive survey of Academy members regarding the perceived causes and solutions of the “translation” problem in management research, Shapiro, Kirkman, and Courtney (2007) called for more research to test two possible interpretations of their results. The first is the concern expressed by respondents with more business and consulting experience who had faced complex, multidisciplinary business issues that academic research has either left unaddressed or not translated clearly into implications for practice. The second possible interpretation is that respondents who are further removed from academic settings (more years since their last degree) may be more prone summarily to dismiss research as “too academic” for practical application. Data-based evidence on this issue would help point to fruitful solutions.

Regardless of the outcome of the study described above, it is certainly reasonable to assume that practitioners will dismiss research findings that are not relevant to the business issues that they face. One way to enhance relevance is to design research with implementation in mind. The excellent volume, *Making It Happen—Designing Research with Implementation in Mind* (Hakel, Sorcher, Beer, & Moses, 1982), encourages researchers to begin the journey with the end in mind, focusing explicitly on application. Doing so forces researchers to confront difficult issues of research design when implementation of the findings is part of the research process, and it forces them to seek the input of practitioners or managers with first-hand experience and in-depth knowledge of an organization.

In a similar vein, Sackett and Mullen (1993) called attention to the limitations of textbook treatments of training evaluation that focus on the use of experimental designs to assess the extent of pre-post change. They noted that in many applied settings an organization's primary concern is not in the extent of change, but rather in certifying that trainees have reached a target level of performance. More broadly, the purpose of evaluation is to help organizations make decisions about future training activities. To do that, it is important that researchers use available tools to assess the type of evaluation that is possible in a given situation, to conduct the most informative evaluation possible, and to communicate to decision makers both the strengths and limitations of whatever evaluation data they obtain.

To the extent that academics can begin to develop research findings that focus on implementation and that help to improve actual organizational decisions, their research is more likely to have powerful effects on managers' perceptions about its value. That kind of evidence-based management research will find a ready market of available buyers in the marketplace for ideas.

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