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THE VERY SEPARATE WORLDS OF ACADEMIC AND PRACTITIONER PUBLICATIONS IN HUMAN RESOURCE MANAGEMENT: REASONS FOR THE DIVIDE AND CONCRETE SOLUTIONS FOR BRIDGING THE GAP

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In their lead article for this forum, Rynes, Giluk, and Brown (2007) take a stab at an important topic and raise some significant questions. The article is well written and for the most part, fairly presented. Their argument that "the gap between science and practice is so pervasive that some have despaired of its ever being narrowed" (Rynes et al., 2007: 987) is compelling. However, the evidence demonstrating the gap and the discussion of the reasons for it are not as compelling. Similarly, the discussion of the need for "evidence-based management" (EBM) is persuasive, but the lack of concrete solutions for achieving the use of EBM remains challenging. The authors are correct when citing Rousseau (2006) and Rousseau and McCarthy (2007) as saying that practitioners need to know evidence-based findings about workplace issues and that managerial decisions are better when they are informed by the "best available scientific evidence" (Rousseau & McCarthy, 2007). It is agreed that practitioners need to know how to effectively use evidence to meet their ongoing and daily challenges. These challenges, however, are far more complex than just knowing the evidence itself or understanding multifaceted issues such as intelligence or personality. Organizations and workplace issues are multifaceted, and it would be inappropriate for a practitioner to consider issues such as intelligence, personality, or even goal setting in isolation.

Rynes et al. state that "in order for EBM to take root, managers must be exposed to, and embrace, scientific evidence" (2007: 987). It would be impressive if this were all it really took for practitioners to use EBM. This view, however, is unrealistic. Exposure is not enough. Embracing is not enough—without proper application. HR professionals are business professionals, and as such, any EBM will need to demonstrate the business case for its application to them. For example, what is the return on investment (ROI) for using intelligence or personality testing? The case can certainly be made for using these tests in conjunction with other predictors. But whose role is it to make the case: academicians or practitioners?

THE ARGUMENT AGAINST PROFESSIONAL PUBLICATIONS

In addition to the argument that EBM is important, the article discusses two possible ways for managers to gain exposure to scientific research.[1] Business magazines such as *HR Magazine* and the *Harvard Business Review (HBR)* should, they argue, cover scientific research and EBM in their stories to get practitioners to learn about the importance of scientific evidence. The authors include *Human Resource Management* in their argument, as it is a "bridge" journal; but this publication is quite different from magazines such as *HBR* and *HR Magazine*. Although there is no disagreement that this is a valid point—practitioners need to be exposed to scientific evidence—it is not entirely clear why the three outlets targeted in this article were highlighted as the primary examples of the problem. First, *Human Resource Management*, although a bridge journal, is a blind-peer-reviewed publication with an impressive and growing citation rate. The growing citation rate itself is an indication that this journal does not fit with the argument as presented by Rynes et al. Second, both *HBR* and *HR Magazine* are highly successful and award-wining business magazines, not journals. A magazine is a publication that, like a journal, is published periodically, yet the two types of publications target very different audiences. A magazine must feature stories of common interest to those who subscribe

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[1] It is unclear in the text, but it appears as though the authors are grouping together or using interchangeably the notion of managers and HR practitioners. The Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) serves the HR profession and HR professionals. Managers as a group are not the "target" audience for SHRM publications.

to it. If editors make significant changes to a magazine's content, they are likely to change or impact the readership, which greatly affects advertising and revenue. Therefore, if the focus of either *HR Magazine* or *HBR* becomes scholarly or steeped in EBM, it is likely that the readership might be lost or negatively impacted. And while it may be tempting to argue that the opposite could be true (i.e., that readership could be gained), this would clearly not be the case for *HR Magazine.* Considerable market research has been conducted and continues to reveal that readers are attracted by the well-written, practical, and useful articles that appear in *HR Magazine* each month. Nonetheless, Rynes and her colleagues have chosen to connect a very real problem to the tangential world of niche magazines.

THE EDUCATIONAL ROUTE TO EBM

It is interesting to note that the other way Rynes and her colleagues suggest managers/practitioners could be exposed is through formal education. This route is quickly dismissed by the authors as not viable because most textbooks do not cover research findings, and many people who teach in business schools do not have scholarly training or credentials. It is disappointing that formal education was dismissed, and it is also unclear if the criticism is of business in general or HR specifically. Without the foundation to understand scientific evidence or the reinforcement of seeing it in business school teaching, how is EBM ultimately to take hold? Moreover, if textbooks are written by academicians, why wouldn't they include research findings translated for practical application?

THREE RESEARCH AREAS HIGHLIGHTED BY RYNES AND COLLEAGUES

The article highlights how three types of HR-related research findings (findings about intelligence, personality, and goal setting) are being translated or transferred. This choice of research areas is based on a narrow view of what is important to HR and what will be useful for practitioners. For the current Rynes et al. article, it is based on what editors and editorial review boards of academic journals believe. Just because there is robust knowledge of a subject does not mean that the subject itself is important to practitioners. For example, as an employer, the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) conducts personality testing with our director and above hires, and we use a validated predictive index for all other hiring. At the end of the day, however, hiring managers have to use their judgment as to which candidates make the cut for further predictive testing and must ultimately select individuals who will fit the organization as well as have the technical capability to do the job. A person who is smart and who gets "results" may be a person who discriminates, bullies, or causes turnover in the organization. Practitioners are mindful of these issues because as HR professionals they see the fallout daily from poor fit or bad management practices and know that intelligence, personality, and goal setting are important but are not enough.

Talent management is a key issue for organizations today, and it is critical for managers to be integrative in their thinking when trying to select the right employees. Intelligence and personality are only partially predictive of success in candidates for management positions. Factors such as accurate job descriptions, effective organizational structure, sound compensation philosophies and reward structures must all be considered in both attracting and selecting employees. Intelligence and personality testing is typically not top of mind for most positions in organizations. It may be very applicable for a small segment of senior jobs, but it may not be realistic for all positions or for where most practitioners spend the bulk of their time.

Is it possible that practitioners know something about the environment in which they work that may supplement what research shows? If a hiring manager hires the smartest person in the candidate pool but he or she does not fit with the organization or has a managerial style that is off-putting to subordinates, then the hiring manager may be creating more of a problem for staff and organization.

MAGAZINES VERSUS JOURNALS

Journalists seek input about broader issues (such as those described above) from the credible sources that they investigate and identify. A journalist is a professional who writes for a public magazine, newspaper, or other popular publication and writes in a style that is intended to inform and be relatively straightforward for the nonacademic community to understand. These writers are investigators and reporters of news stories and essays that have practical impact. It is unrealistic to think that magazines and journalists should include an abundance of scholarly research in a story or article that they prepare for a monthly publication. It is equally unrealistic to think that magazine journalists would routinely read journals such as those listed below to gather fodder for their stories. The following journals are those in which articles about intelligence (GMA)[2] would most likely be found:

- *International Journal of Selection and Assessment*
- *Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology*
- *Journal of Vocational Behavior*
- *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*
- *Journal of Applied Psychology*
- *Personnel Psychology*

Yet Rynes, Giluk, and Brown are correct in saying that practice can and should benefit from what evidence-based research has to offer. Journalists and HR practitioners have not been trained to read these journals, nor do they appear to be interested in scholarly research as presented by scholars.

Practitioners do not read academic journals and they do not lament that topics that are important to them are not covered by scholarly research. Instead, they look for people they view as credible (those with Ph.D.'s, book authors, highly successful executives, etc.) to meaningfully communicate to them knowledge about problems they face in their organizations. Scholars typically do not write in a style that motivates practitioners to read their articles. Additionally, they typically do not interact with practitioners to find out what their needs and interests are, so as to target them more closely in the research they conduct. How often do researchers talk to practitioners about their pressing problems and then follow up with research that will help address those problems? For those who do take the time to include managers and practitioners in the conceptualization phase, how long does it typically take for the research to be done and then to appear in a journal? Two years? Three years? Five years or more? What are the chances that the academic paper will be accepted for publication? In the case of *AMR* and *AMJ* and other top-tier journals, the overall acceptance rate is about 8 to 10 percent and is based on what reviewers have come to expect from traditional scholarly submissions. If not in these premier publications, where (if at all) will practitioner-focused work be published so that it will get into the hands of journalists and practitioners and be equally satisfying to researchers who are rewarded for publishing in top-tier journals? So here's the dilemma: Journalists and practitioners do not have the time or desire to read scientific research, and scholarly researchers do not have the time or desire to write for nonacademic audiences. But both groups would agree that research is important to practice.

The Role of SHRM and *HR Magazine*

Practitioners are concerned with such issues as succession planning and leadership development, talent acquisition, talent retention and employee engagement, and health care costs. While intelligence, personality, and goal setting are clearly important, it is also clear that these two lists do not overlap. Intelligence and personality are very important—but in the scheme of talent management, they are but one small piece that practitioners must consider. In fact, most articles that are written and published by scholars are relatively narrow, and although they do advance scholarship and a specific research stream, they do so only incrementally. Other, more research-based publications of SHRM and the SHRM Foundation are designed to supplement the stories that appear in *HR Magazine*. These publications reside on the SHRM Web site (www.shrm.org) so practitioners can retrieve them when and where they are needed. For example, the Effective Practice Guidelines series is prepared by scholars, written for practitioners, funded by the SHRM Foundation, and free to all on the SHRM Web site (www.shrm.org/foundation). One such publication, *Selection Assessment Methods: A Guide to Implementing Formal Assessments to Build a High-Quality Workforce*, is a document prepared by a subject matter expert with both research and practical experience. And, according to Heneman (2005), writing in the foreword of the report, it distills research findings and expert opinion into specific advice on how to conduct effective HR practices. This publication includes much of the information that Rynes et al. lament is missing from magazine articles.[3]

Rynes and her colleagues essentially argue that publications like *HR Magazine* and *HBR* should be more proactive in their coverage of scientific evidence. In concept, there is no disagreement that

[2] A search of ProQuest on the subject of intelligence ("general mental ability," or "GMA") in hiring revealed just ten articles since 2000 in the six journals cited above. To be fair, much of the scholarly work on this topic was published earlier, in the 1980s and 1990s. Journalists and practitioners, however, would tend to look for very current citations.

[3] A search of the SHRM Web site reveals a number of white papers and other articles that cover this topic. For example see, "Using Personality Assessment in Personnel Selection," "Assessment Instruments for the Global Workforce," "Methods to Pinpoint Jobfit," and "Employee Testing Series: Reliability and Validity of Selection Tests."

including more science in the field is valuable. However, assuming that *HR Magazine* and *HBR* are the primary venues in which to accomplish this is much too narrow. While *HR Magazine* is the premier HR practitioner publication and is an award-winning business publication, it is circulated primarily to the SHRM membership. Although the SHRM membership is considerable—currently, more than 225,000 members make it the world's largest HR professional association—SHRM does not serve even one-quarter of the HR population in the Unites States, let alone the rest of the world. Yes, SHRM is a place to start, but nibbling at the corners of a problem will not solve the problem.

How Much Practitioner-Useful Research Is Published in Journals?

Science needs to find a way to deliver to HR practitioners. And practitioners need to learn to be more accepting and appreciative of scientific evidence. One of the things we have learned from our members that may, since it is such a large group, be generalizable to at least some portion of the whole HR profession is that they want information and tools that will help them do their jobs daily and be strategic. Here is some of the consistent feedback SHRM gets and that drives our content creation both in the magazine and on the Web:

- Practical real-world information
- Easy to read and understand
- Stay up-to-date on trends
- Competitive practices
- Help avoiding legal and regulatory problems
- Understanding big strategic issues
- Staying ahead of issues
- Save time in looking for important/useful information

In fact, it is interesting to note that *AMR* and *AMJ* do not cover an abundance of topics of general interest to practitioners. For example, of the approximately 300 articles published in *AMJ* over the past five years (since 2002), only a handful of articles can be directly categorized as covering these three key topics for HR practitioners: workforce planning and employment (about 16 articles), total rewards (about 18 articles), and employee and labor relations (about 22 articles). While *Personnel Psychology* had far fewer articles overall during the same time period, it carried more than twice the number of articles on workforce planning and employment (about 40) that *AMJ* carried. Conversely, *PPsych* has run less than one-third the number of articles on total rewards (about 5). Regardless, these articles are not likely to be characterized by our members as following the eight drivers listed above.

Consistently over the years, our members have told us that employee relations, benefits, compensation, staffing and employment, organization development, and measurement and metrics are the most important topics to them. Drilling down on what practitioners are interested in relative to employee relations are the following topics: legal/regulatory issues and changes to laws, performance management, retention, and employee engagement. Drilling down on benefits, practitioners say they are interested in health care (costs), legal and regulatory issues, retirement plans, and leave administration. Market research also tells us that our members are more likely to go to the SHRM *Web site* than to our magazine to get the information they need.[4] Indeed, there is a huge amount of content on the SHRM Web site that provides the tools and resources that practitioners need to inform their daily and strategic activities. The magazine remains a "must read" when it comes in the mail, but the SHRM Web site is the place to go to look for answers and up-to-date information.

Goal setting has been called the most ubiquitous motivation theory that exists. Indeed, contrary to the implication of the Rynes et al. article, many practitioners make excellent use of goal setting in practice and do so on the basis of the very clear interpretations and evidence-based research that has been made available over the years in both scholarly and popular publications. It may be quite erroneous to assume that, because goal setting is not covered in depth or in the spotlight of an article, that many practitioner publications do not include it as a useful and important tool.[5]

[4] During the period from July 1, 2006, to June 30, 2007, there were approximately 82,000 unique member visits per month to the Web site. In 2006, 196,657 unique SHRM members visited the site and, as of June 30, 2007, 172,273 unique SHRM members had visited the site. During the 12 months from July 1, 2006, to June 30, 2007, about 1,000,000 nonmember visits per month took place (though it is not known how many were unique versus multiple visits by the same individual.)

[5] For example, a search of the SHRM Web site for the term "goal setting" reveals that goal setting is covered in a myriad of articles (22 references in *HR Magazine* alone), white papers, and Web site stories (about 140 hits in all using a Google-powered "advanced" search; the bulk of the references are from 2000 forward). See "Setting Performance Expectations: Return to the Basics," "Performance Management Series: Management by Objectives," and "Goalsharing Scores: The Bonuses to How Well Employees Meet Work Unit Goals."

SHIFTING THE PARADIGM TO BRIDGE THE GAP

How are practitioners to learn from scholarly research? Only top articles are published in top academic journals. An article is deemed "top" if it is methodologically sound and covers all the issues raised by blind reviewers. Typically, reviewers press an author on methodology and theory but not on practical application. In fact, most academic articles include a few sentences or paragraphs, at most, discussing practical application. Why then would a practitioner read *AMR* or *AMJ* or other scholarly journals on a regular basis? Indeed, why would a journalist wade through an academic article to try and find a golden nugget when they are not trained to read or interpret such articles? One possible consideration is to invite academicians to submit articles to business magazines, but this is not likely to be viable. Think of the criteria that editors of academic journals apply to articles and the resulting acceptance rates. Business editors too have a set of standards they apply when considering submissions—and, like scholarly editors, rightly so.

Would editors and reviewers at *AMJ* or *Personnel Psychology* think of changing their standards for accepting articles? Doubtful. Should business magazines have articles with more research included in them? Probably. Should academic journal articles have more practical application? Definitely. Here's the question: How can we accomplish all of this? If neither "side" will publish the other's articles and neither side fully understands the other's perspective, how can we move forward with greater academic-practitioner interface that will advance both practice and science?

I have been a member of the Academy of Management and have attended every annual Academy conference since 1984. And although I am not as expert as many of my colleagues in the Academy, I have listened to discussions and read articles about the academic-practitioner interface for almost 25 years. At times, it has felt like some academicians are saying, "Pay attention to what I do because I know what is important," rather than asking, "How can I use my significant (academic) talents to help HR practitioners and managers?" By the same token, practitioners read what they consider to be "research" without always understanding that it may not be scientific and may therefore not be solid evidence upon which to base important decisions. There is a fundamental difference between how academics approach the analysis of a problem and how practitioners focus on a problem. We need to change this difference and make a concentrated effort to close the gap if EBM is to be taken seriously, let alone take root in the practitioner community.

FINAL THOUGHTS

A few final limitations of the Rynes et al. article, which highlight the fundamental difference in the approaches of academicians and practitioners, should be noted before I conclude. While Rynes and her colleagues looked at publications targeted to practitioners, they never actually talked to or included practitioners in their discussion. A previous study by Rynes, Colbert, and Brown (2002) examined what practitioners *know*, but that is very different from asking practitioners today why they do or do not use or value scientific research—and more importantly, what it would take for them to apply EBM. Part of the problem here is that academicians assume that scholars know what they are talking about when they write a scholarly article and, since scholars are their target audience, they practically talk in code to practitioners. For example, Rynes and her colleagues take issue with Bates's (2002) interpretation of the "Big Five" personality dimensions and do mention them, using single words in parentheses, in their discussion. However, many academic articles about the Big Five bury the definitions or describe them in slightly different ways. Often scholarly writers assume the reader should know what the "Big Five" and other terms and acronyms mean. In a recent article appearing in *Personnel Psychology* (Marcus, Lee, & Ashton, 2007), "Big Five" appears in the title, but the five factors are never enumerated in the text. In another recent article (Clarke & Roberson, 2005), the Big Five are noted in parentheses as "extroversion," "neuroticism," "conscientiousness," "agreeableness," and "openness." At the core, these five descriptors may be the same as the ones listed by Rynes et al., but a nonacademician might have a difficult time wading through this.

ACTION PLAN: A ROAD MAP FOR CHANGE

What follows are ten concrete suggestions that may help in addressing this important and serious gap:

1. Practitioner reviewers should be included as reviewers for all blind-peer-reviewed submissions to academic journals such as *AMR* and *AMJ* and the like. This should be done by the academic community in a consistent and conscientious way.

2. There should be a required section on practitioner application in all scholarly articles in journals such as *AMR*, *AMJ*, *Journal of Management*, and the like.
3. Academicians should join practitioner organizations and attend practitioner conferences and local practitioner events to interface with practitioners on a regular basis. Senior and executive practitioners should be encouraged to attend academic conferences to begin to interact with the academic community on their "turf" and to learn not only about what they research but also about what motivates them to research certain topics.[6]
4. Business-to-business magazines such as *HR Magazine* and *HBR* should quote scholars and scientific evidence whenever possible.[7] Feature articles should include a section or sidebar that addresses scientific evidence that gives insight into the topic covered in the story, or the story should link to a list of scientific articles that can be consulted for more information.
5. Scholars should talk with practitioners about research questions before their research is conducted and after results are obtained to maximize transfer by creating avenues for conversations to occur that will facilitate greater understanding by researchers for the write-up of their results. Practitioner organizations and academic organizations should work together to facilitate these dialogues.[8]
6. Textbooks should be steeped in scientific evidence but written for the average student; they should include insights from practitioners as well as scholarly information.
7. Major academic journals (or their publishers) should send press releases about HR-related articles—as soon as they are accepted for publication—to editors and journalists at practitioner magazines. The press releases should highlight the golden nuggets for practice to maximize the likelihood of the magazines including the information in stories.
8. The Academy of Management, Society for Industrial and Organizational Psychology (SIOP), and other academic organizations should actively invite press to their annual conferences and prepare advance materials that will allow journalists and writers to have meaningful and insightful experiences. A journalist attending a regular academic conference session is not likely to have the take-aways needed for meaningful interpretation of presented papers.
9. Consider creating a new journal/magazine in partnership with a practitioner organization that is of interest to practitioners and includes research-based knowledge.
10. Conduct focus groups or host a day-long symposium between academicians and practitioners on the issue of the gap between scientific evidence and HR practice with a professional scribe to take notes and summarize the themes and points that are made; make a commitment to create a set of action steps to follow up these events. Leaders from the top professional and academic societies should support and facilitate events like this.

We can't keep nibbling at the corners of the problem or lamenting that transfer is not taking place and pointing to one small contributing factor. We collectively need to address the situation with some concrete steps. This will take the efforts of both practitioners and academicians. It will also take open-mindedness to think outside traditional constructs in both academia and practice. The foregoing ten suggestions are intended as discussion points with which to begin the dialogue.

[6] It is not realistic to assume that midlevel practitioners would do this or would benefit from attending academic conferences.

[7] In the 30 months from January 2005 to June 2007, about 70 academicians were quoted in *HR Magazine*. These individuals include but are not limited to the following: Pat Wright, Fred Foulkes, Ed Lawler, Margaret Neale, Christopher Collins, David Harrison, Noel Tichy, John Boudreau, Jeffrey Pfeffer, Judith Collins, and Peter Capelli.

[8] For an excellent discussion see "Academic Research inside Organizations: Inputs, Processes and Outcomes" (Rynes, McNatt, & Bretz, 1999).

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