Evidence-Based HR: What is it and is it really happening yet?

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Outline

◆ What is evidence-based practice?
◆ Background to evidence-based HR: Why do all practitioners need evidence based practice?
  – General cognitive biases that affect us all
  – Practice fads and fashions
  – Consultants/advisors/fad vendors
  – Power and politics
◆ How evidence-based is HR? Some criteria
The underlying simple and modest logic of evidence-based practice

1. Practitioners in any field routinely make decisions and judgements (e.g., about interventions)

2. Those decisions are based on evidence (information) of various and many types

3. Using only a little evidence or evidence that is not relevant or valid is likely to produce poorer decisions and poorer outcomes

4. Using more and more relevant and valid evidence is likely to produce better decisions and outcome
So what’s the problem?

- Not a single problem but many interlinked problems including...

1. Research and evidence produced by management schools *in general* is not being used or applied much
2. Few incentives for (HR) academics to get involved in applying research
3. (HR) Management practice often not much influenced by research or evidence
4. Few incentives for (HR) managers to use research and evidence (including academic evidence) in their practice
Who thinks it’s a problem?

- Many Past-Presidents of the *Academy of Management* (professional body for management academics)
  - Hambrick (1994): *What if the Academy actually mattered?*
  - Huff (2000): *Mode1/2 knowledge production*
  - Van de Ven (2002): *Co-production of knowledge, engaged scholarship*
  - Bartunek (2003): *Collaborative research*
  - Pearce (2004): *What do we know and how do we really know it?*
  - Rousseau (2006): *Evidence-based Management*
  - Cummings (2007): *Quest for an engaged academy*
Who else thinks it’s a problem?

- Many other management academics for example:
  - Pfeffer & Sutton: *Evidence-Based Management*
  - Lawler: *Why HR Practices are not Evidence-Based*
  - Rynes: *Tackling the “great divide” between research production and dissemination in human resource management*
  - Hodgkinson & Herriot: *Re-aligning the Stakeholders in Management Research*
  - Latham: *Becoming the Evidence-Based Manager*
  - Locke: *Handbook of Principles of Organizational Behavior: Indispensable Knowledge for Evidence-Based Management*
Why business still ignores business schools

Michael Skapinker
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The Academy of Management is the world's leading association of business scholars, with more than 18,000 members in 104 countries, so it is something of an honour to be criticised in its journal.

I am not the sole target. An article in the Academy's Learning & Education journal has taken to task several people who have argued that the research turned out by business schools is irrelevant to business.

My contribution was in a column in 2008, entitled "Why business ignores the business schools". I said that there was no profession in which the gap between researchers and practitioners was so wide. While medical, engineering and law schools energetically engaged with their respective professions, business schools did not command the attention of managers.

It was not just outsiders who said this. My column was based on an anguished series of articles – in the Academy of Management journal, as it happened – from business school professors admitting that few people paid attention to their research.
What field is this?

- “a research-user gap”
- “practitioners do not read academic journals”
- “the findings of research into what is an effective intervention are not being translated into actual practice”
- “academics not practitioners are driving the research agenda”
- “the relevance, quality and applicability of research is questionable”
- “practice is being driven more by fads and fashions than research”
- “many practices are doing more harm than good”
- “the collective wisdom from research is being lost”
What is EBMgt/HRM?

- Evidence-based management is about making decisions through the conscientious, explicit, and judicious use of four sources of information: (1) practitioner expertise and judgment, (2) evidence from the local context, (3) a critical evaluation of the best available research evidence, and (4) the perspectives of those people who might be affected by the decision. (Briner, Denyer, Rousseau, 2009)
What is evidence-based management?

The Four Elements of EBMgt

- Evaluated external evidence
- Practitioner experience and judgments
- Context, organizational actors, circumstances
- Stakeholders (e.g., employees, preferences, or values)

Decision
What is a HRM decision in this context?

- HRM practitioners make many kinds of decisions
  - Small or large
  - Routine/programmed or unique/non-programmed
  - Fast/immediate or somewhat slower
  - Few resource implications or large resource implications
  - Full information with certain outcome or limited information with uncertain outcome

- Intuition or ‘gut feel’ great for some decisions but not so good for these

- Like any other source of evidence gut needs to be subject to critical scrutiny
What is evidence-based practice? Some misconceptions and myths

- **Evidence means quantitative ‘scientific’ evidence.** No. *Evidence in general just means information – like the use of ‘evidence’ in legal settings – anything might count if it’s valid and relevant.*

- **Evidence-based practice means practitioners cannot or should not use their professional expertise.** No. *Expertise is another form of knowledge which can be as valid or relevant as any other. And expertise is necessary to apply evidence.*

- **Evidence can prove things.** No. *Just probabilities or indications based on limited information and situations.*

- **Evidence tells you the truth about things.** No. *Truth is a whole different thing.*
What is evidence-based practice? Some misconceptions and myths

- **New exciting single ‘breakthrough’ studies provide the best evidence.** No. *It’s about what a body of research is suggesting.*

- **Collecting valid and relevant evidence gives you The Answer to The Problem.** No. *Evidence rarely gives you The Answer but helps you make better-informed decisions.*

- **Doing evidence-based practice means doing what the research evidence tells you works.** No. *Research evidence is just one of four sources of evidence. Evidence-based practice is about practice not research. Evidence doesn’t speak for itself or do anything.*
What is evidence-based practice? Some misconceptions and myths

- **If you don’t have the evidence you can’t do anything.** No. But you practice explicitly knowing this. It’s not about perfection or a completely knowable world.

- **Experts (e.g., consultants and management school professors) know all about the evidence so you just need to ask them.** Rarely true. Experts are invariably biased, have limited knowledge and have vested interests (particularly if their expertise is related to their power or other resources). We need to make our own judgements and overcome “trust me I’m a doctor”-type deference.
It is not weird to use evidence in everyday life

- Which film shall I watch this weekend?
- Which hotel shall I book in a city I’ve never been to before?
- What kind of camera should I buy?
- Which school is best for my children?
- Are those plug in alarms that are supposed to deter mice and rats any good?
- Should I apply for that job?
Images of IMDB, Rotten Tomatoes, Trip Advisor, Which removed to reduce file size
So it’s not weird to use evidence in everyday life – but is it weird in organizational life?

- Managers (and organizations) are generally *supposed* to use evidence to make decisions – part of what being a professional manager is about.
- But it often seems that HRM is not particularly evidence-based.
- In *general* HR managers appear to make some use of evidence from three sources: Expertise and experience, stakeholders, context.
- But, for various reasons, appear to make relatively little use of external academic evidence.
- One reason is that HR managers are not trained to do this – and that *other things drive decisions*.
A bat and ball cost one pound and ten pence. The bat costs a pound more than the ball. How much does the ball cost?
Error and biases in problem-solving and decision-making

In a lake, there is a patch of lily pads. Every day, the patch doubles in size. If it takes 48 days for the patch to cover the entire lake, how long would it take for the patch to cover half of the lake?
Error and biases in problem-solving and decision-making

A certain town is served by two hospitals. In the larger hospital about 45 babies are born each day, and in the smaller hospital about 15 babies are born each day. As you know, about 50% of all babies are boys. However the exact percentage varies from day to day. Sometimes it may be higher than 50%, sometimes lower. For a period of 1 year, each hospital recorded the days on which more than 60% of the babies born were boys. Which hospital do you think recorded more such days?”

1. The larger hospital
2. The smaller hospital
3. About the same (that is, within 5% of each other)
Error and biases in problem-solving and decision-making – some *examples*

- **Confirmation bias**: Tendency to interpret and search for information consistent with one’s prior beliefs
- **Mere exposure effect**: Tendency to develop a preference for things which we have become more familiar with
- **Hindsight bias**: Tendency to see past events as being more predictable than they were before the event occurred
- **Loss aversion**: Tendency to prefer avoiding losses than to acquiring gains
- **Anchoring effect**: Tendency to rely too heavily or over-emphasize one piece of information (e.g., restaurant wine lists, large reductions in price in sales)
- **Framing effect**: Drawing different conclusions from exactly the same information presented in different ways (e.g., would you prefer a ready meal that’s “85% fat free” or “15% fat”?)
- **Meta-cognitive bias**: The belief we are immune from such biases
Visual perceptions too: Some classic optical illusions
Management fads and fashions

- What are they?
- Some example
- What do they do?
Management fashions (Abrahamson)

- **Management fashion**: “a relatively transitory collective belief, disseminated by management fashion setters, that a management technique leads rational management progress.”

- **Management fashion-setting**: “the process by which management fashion setters continuously redefine both theirs and fashion followers' collective beliefs about which management techniques lead rational management progress.”

- **Management fashion-setters**: “Consulting firms, management gurus, business mass-media publications, and business schools.”
Management fashions (Carson et al, 2000)

- Interventions that are:
  - subject to social contagion because they are novel and perceived to be progressive, or preferable existing fashions
  - or are perceived to be innovative, rational, functional
  - are aimed at improving organizational performance either materially or symbolically through image enhancement
  - motivated by a desire either to fix an existing problem or capitalize on opportunities for improvement
  - considered to be of transitory value because, despite some acceptance no systematic research supporting their utility emerges
Examples

- Business process re-engineering
- Total quality management
- Quality circles
- Talent management
- Lean
- Outsourcing
- Employee Stock Ownership
Employee engagement – an aside

- Anyone read a systematic review of high-quality evidence about what EE is, how it works, and if it does anything?
  - Huge definitional problems
  - Is it anything different or new? Gallup Q12 correlates .91 with job satisfaction at unit level

- *Just how bad an idea is employee engagement? On multiple meanings, muddled measurement and management myths*

http://www.kent.ac.uk/webteamtest/kbs-medway/3-briner.html
ABRAHAMSON (1996)


- **Stage 2 – Maturity**: Reengineering: The Hot New Managing Tool, The Reengineering Rage, Warning: This Good Idea May Become a Fad, Reengineering: Beyond the Buzzword.

- **Stage 3 – Decline**: Ten Reasons Why TQM Doesn't Work, TQM: The Mystique, the Mistakes, The Hocus-Pocus of Reengineering, Why TQM Fails and What to Do About It.
### Relationships between Management Fashion Emergence, Timing, and Life Cycle Variables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Decade during Which Fashion Emerged</th>
<th>Average Number of Years between Fashion Introduction and Fashion Peak</th>
<th>Average Number of Articles on Fashion during Peak Year</th>
<th>Average Number of Articles on Fashion during Peak Year Divided by Average Pages in <em>Business Periodicals Index</em></th>
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</thead>
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<td>1950s–1970s</td>
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<td>44</td>
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<tr>
<td>1980s</td>
<td>7.5</td>
<td>121</td>
<td>5.14</td>
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<tr>
<td>1990s</td>
<td>2.6</td>
<td>130a</td>
<td>4.70</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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How are fads a problem? (Donaldson & Hilmer, 1998)

- “The main problem...is their lack of any solid intellectual foundation. Implicit in each fad is a cause effect statement that is rarely made explicit and never properly supported.”

- “...management needs to evolve a sound body of knowledge and clear language that will assist members of the profession to reason cogently. Faddism is the enemy of this professionalism.”
Related concept of the quick fix

- Focus on style and presentation not content or process
- Not be evaluated
- Not be as quick as had been hoped
- Not be effective so followed by another quick fix
- Become subject to organizational amnesia*
- Can be career-enhancing for managers (e.g., issue selling, kick-ass CEOs)

*Kitchen equipment analogy
Images of diet products removed to reduce file size
Kyle lost 37 lbs
Jonni lost 17 lbs
Gail slashed 53 lbs of fat
Linn lost 40 lbs
Marcia lost 52 lbs
Tina lost 35 lbs
So why are fads and fashions followed?

- Promise to deliver a lot and fast
- Appear simple
- New and shiny
- Will make everything alright
- Help contain anxieties around intractable problems
- Help user feel effective and cutting edge
- Seems very ‘human’ to want to find quick, easy answers that other people are adopting too

Evidence-based management not really much of a fad using these criteria
BANANA GUARD

Transport your mid-morning snack to work or school *without* it looking as if it’s gone five rounds in a boxing ring!

Bruised and battered bananas will become a thing of the past when slipped into this purpose-built protective case.

Designed to accommodate **virtually every shape and size of banana**, it’s especially useful for slipping in a rucksack when hiking on the fells – after all, a bit of extra energy will always be welcome.

25cm (10”) L.

**Cat Ref: 10380**

25cm (9¾”)

- Dishwasher safe
- Freezer safe
- Microwave safe
The role of consultants

- Translators of research evidence?
- Brokers or sellers of management fads and fashions?
- External objective advisors?
- Repositories of experience and wisdom?
- Change agents?
- Ways of justifying and externalizing unpopular decisions?
“...consultants and others who sell ideas and techniques are always rewarded for getting work, only sometimes rewarded for doing good work, and hardly ever rewarded for whether their advice actually enhances performance.

The incentives are often even more perverse than that, because if a client company’s problems are only partly solved that leads to more work for the consulting firm.”
What are the incentives for consultancies to be evidence-based?

- Get the work, get more work, and keep getting work (so depends almost entirely on what clients want)
  - Persuade (may not take much) clients they need some new thing, idea, technique, approach
  - Sell them the relevant product or service or intervention based on that idea, technique or approach
  - Saturate the market until everyone’s bought it
  - Invent or borrow new ideas, techniques and approaches clients do not yet use
  - Sell them the relevant product or service or intervention
  - Repeat
Power, politics and careers

- What are managers rewarded for?
  - Doing what works? But very few evaluations
  - Getting things done?
  - Making things happen?
  - Not rocking the boat?
  - Working hard?
  - Obeying orders?
  - Solving problems?
  - Meeting targets and goals? But who sets and why?
  - Making their bosses look good?

- Do very senior people get there by being evidence-based managers?
Huge incentives and punishments around conventional thinking, fads, fashions

- And there we see the power of any big managerial idea [fads]. It may be smart, like quality, or stupid, like conglomeration. Either way, if everybody's doing it, the pressure to do it too is immense. If it turns out to be smart, great. If it turns out to be stupid, well, you were in good company and most likely ended up no worse off than your competitors. Your company's board consists mostly of CEOs who were probably doing it at their companies. How mad can they get?
Huge incentives and punishments around conventional thinking, fads, fashions

- The true value of conventional management wisdom [current fashion] is not that it's wise or dumb, but that it's conventional. It makes one of the hardest jobs in the world, managing an organization, a little easier. By following it, managers everywhere see a way to drag their sorry behinds through another quarter without getting fired. And isn't that, really, what it's all about?

(Colvin, 2004, *Fortune*)
What are the incentives for managers to be evidence-based?

- Not rewarded for doing what ‘works’ – few evaluations
- Speed and action valued more highly than accuracy and analysis
- Managing and understanding power and politics to get things done more valued than understanding and using evidence to make decisions
What are the incentives for academics to be evidence-based or support evidence-based HR management?

- Not particularly evidence-based in their own practice (e.g., research methods, teaching methods)
- Rewarded largely through publishing ‘new’ research in the ‘best’ peer-reviewed journals
- No incentives to produce systematic reviews of evidence
- Few incentives to make work relevant to organizations except through
  - Teaching (though what models of learning are used and how is teaching rated?)
  - Personal consultancy (dangers of the ‘expert’)
  - Token “Implications for Practice” section at the end of journal articles
So why do all practitioners need evidence-based practice?

- General cognitive biases that limit decision-making and judgement
- Practice fads and fashions
- Consultants/advisors/fad vendors
- Power and politics
How evidence-based is HR?

- This is not about whether or not HR uses evidence – of course it does.
- It is about the *extent* to which HR is evidence-based.
- Without such an analysis difficult to make progress to becoming more evidence-based.
- But how to judge?
Is it really happening? Some evaluation criteria

1. The term “evidence-based” is well-known and used

2. The latest research findings and systematic research summaries are accessible to practitioners

3. Articles reporting primary research and traditional literature reviews are accessible to practitioners
Is it really happening: Some evaluation criteria

4. ‘Cutting-edge’ practices, panaceas and fashionable new ideas are treated with healthy scepticism

5. There is a demand for evidence-based practice from clients and customers

6. Practice decisions are integrative and draw on the four sources of information and evidence described in the definition of EBMgt

7. Initial training and CPD adopt evidence-based approaches
SO WHAT DO HR MANAGERS DO?

- Little systematic evidence about what managers do but...
- Often under pressure to do quick fixes
- Often few perceived advantages to slower fixes
- Can say with some certainty that EBP does not characterize most HR manager activity
- Though of course all HR managers do use some evidence in some ways
- But HR generally still a fad junkie waiting for the Next Big Thing
Seven common misperceptions (Rynes et al, 2002)

- 72% agreed but it is probably wrong

1. Conscientiousness is a better predictor of employee performance than intelligence.

The average validity coefficient is .51 for intelligence, .31 for conscientiousness. They are both important predictors of performance, but intelligence is relatively more important. At the very lowest levels of job complexity (unskilled work), their importance is about equal. However, as jobs increase in complexity, intelligence becomes more and more important.
Seven common misperceptions (Rynes et al, 2002)

- 57% agreed but it is probably wrong

2. Companies that screen job applicants for values have higher performance than those that screen for intelligence.

Intelligence is the best single predictor of performance. Although values fit does predict employee satisfaction and retention, little evidence exists of a direct link to performance. Even if a link is shown some time in the future, it is unlikely to approach the magnitude of the effect size for intelligence.
Seven common misperceptions (Rynes et al, 2002)

- 68% agreed but it is probably wrong

3. Integrity tests don’t work well in practice because so many people lie on them.

People try to make themselves look a little more ethical than they actually are. This does not seem to affect the usefulness of these tests as predictors of performance.
Seven common misperceptions (Rynes et al, 2002)

- 83% agreed but it is probably wrong

5. Encouraging employees to participate in decision making is more effective for improving organizational performance than setting performance goals.

On average, performance improves 16 percent when goal-setting is implemented. The average effect from employee participation is < 1 percent. Participation can produce both positive and negative outcomes. Employees must have a clear picture of what they are participating for—that is, what they are trying to achieve—in order for participation to be successful.
Seven common misperceptions (Rynes et al, 2002)

- 70% agreed but it is probably wrong

6. Most errors in performance appraisal can be eliminated by providing training that describes the kinds of errors managers tend to make and suggesting ways to avoid them.

Performance-appraisal errors are extremely difficult to eliminate. Training to eliminate certain types of errors often introduces other types of errors and sometimes even decreases accuracy. The most common appraisal error is leniency, and managers often realize they are committing it. Mere training is insufficient to eliminate these kinds of errors; more systemic action is required such as intensive monitoring or forced rankings.
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Why don’t some HR practitioners like EBMgt?

- Can undermines formal authority
- Feel it means they can’t do what they want
- Speed valued more than accuracy
- It’s effortful
- Are not rewarded for doing what works (little evaluation)
- Feel can’t use own experience and judgment (not true)
- Have too high expectations of ‘evidence’ – that evidence should give you The Answer otherwise it’s not worth knowing
- Distrust of science based on way it’s often reported
The Daily Mail oncological ontology project

- “a blog following the Daily Mail’s ongoing mission to divide all the inanimate objects in the world into those that cause or cure cancer”
Things that cause cancer

- Air travel
- Baby bottles
- Beer
- Bras
- Bubble bath
- Childlessness
- Chocolate
- English breakfast
- Left-handedness
- Pickles
- Skiing
- Shaving
- Sun cream
- Tea
- Vitamins
- Wi-Fi
- Worcestershire sauce
- Working
Things that prevent cancer

- Almonds
- Brussel sprouts
- Coconut shells
- Countryside
- Dancing
- Eating slowly
- Housework
- Ketchup
- Leeks
- Magnets
- Masturbation
- Migraine
- Mushrooms
- Pasta
- Pumpkins
- Pets
- Relaxation
- Viagra
Things that cause and prevent cancer

- Allergies
- Bread
- Caffeine
- Children
- Chocolate
- Dieting
- Fruit
- Gardening
- Measles

- Milk
- Mobile phones
- Mouthwash
- Rice
- Statins
- Stress
- Tanning pills
- Tea
- Vitamins
How to become a little more evidence-based

- Evaluate where you are now personally and organizationally
- Identify what skills and other resources you might need
- Chief evidence officer?
- Get training in evidence-based management
- Get access to peer-reviewed evidence
Incorporating academic (published) evidence

- Do you have access to academic journals?
- Do you have resources to help you gather and interpret this evidence?
- Is it incorporated into your decision-making?

The Four Elements of EBMgt

- Evaluated external evidence
- Practitioner experience and judgments
- Stakeholders (e.g., employees), preferences, or values
- Context, organizational actors, circumstances
What is a systematic review?

- It’s research on existing research
- Because single studies don’t matter – it’s the body of evidence we need to use
- They have a clear, explicit and replicable methodology
  - Clear review question – what is the specific question we want to answer?
  - Search strategy – where to look and why?
  - Quality criteria – what will count as high, medium, and low quality and inadmissible evidence?
Gathering the evidence together

- For each study found
  - How relevant is it?
  - How ‘good’ is it methodologically in relation to the review question
  - What is it telling us?

- Synthesize or summarize the evidence

- Allows us to draw reliable conclusions about what we know and do not know about a given question or problem

- Incorporated with the other three sources of evidence to help inform decisions
SRs already happening in other areas

Worldwide communities devoted to promoting access to evidence-based practice
Members collaborate to summarize state of the art knowledge on specific practices identified as important and under/over/mis-used
On-line access to information, designed for ease and speed of use
Cochrane Collaboration

- Founded in 1993 it aims to help people make well-informed decisions by preparing, maintaining and promoting the accessibility of systematic reviews of the effects of interventions in all areas of health care

- Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews
  - 1995 36 reviews
  - 1999 500 reviews
  - 2001 1000 reviews
  - 2004 2000 reviews + 1400 published protocols (plans)
  - 2012 5000+ reviews

- Reviews prepared by healthcare professionals who volunteer (10000 people worldwide)

- Cochrane Review Groups

- Application and debate about quality standards
Welcome to CEBMa

Welcome to the website of the Center for Evidence-Based Management. The CEBMa was established in Amsterdam as the first formal organization with the aim of promoting evidence-based practice in the field of management and consulting. Our mission is to promote, develop and teach evidence-based practice to enhance the profession of management. The CEBMa website provides support and resources to managers, consultants, teachers and academics and others interested in evidence-based practice.

Upcoming events or publications

Please see our event calendar for a full schedule of upcoming events and workshops.
How to become a little more evidence-based

- View it as personal and professional and organizational development
- Ask lots of questions (critical thinking skills)
- Develop decision aids, tools, processes, frameworks
- Develop healthy scepticism
- Accept ignorance and limits of all forms of knowledge and evidence
It’s a choice

- How do you want to practice as a HR professional?
- How would you like your skills, knowledge and effectiveness to develop over the course (of your possibly very long) career?
- How do you think the profession needs to develop?
- Do you want us to go beyond fads and fashions? If so, how is it going to happen?
Evidence-based approaches still appear to be one of the most useful ways of getting more, critically evaluated evidence into the decision-making processes
Thank you

Questions, thoughts, comments, criticisms?

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