The challenge of communicating scientific knowledge to practitioners confronts all fields of science. Medicine has a long track record of interest, concern, and innovation in this respect. In the past decade, with significant contributions from leading figures such as Pfeffer and Sutton (2006), Rousseau (2005), and Rynes, Brown, and Colbert (2002), this debate has entered the discourse of management research. The Rynes, Giluk, and Brown (2007) “separate worlds” study takes this debate a step further by exploring the role of a distinctive group of communicators of knowledge.

Rynes et al. make three main claims: First, academic experts agree about evidence supporting the benefits of using specific practices—including a number about which practitioners have muddled or incorrect beliefs—and agree to some extent about specific important human resource (HR) findings that they believe all managers should know about. Secondly, intermediate practitioner-oriented publications should communicate this information to practitioners, and such communication should be of appropriate quantity and quality; in other words, coverage of the information should accurately reflect the academic evidence. Thirdly, the existing evidence suggests that U.S. intermediary publications fail on both counts.

Rynes and colleagues’ analysis falls squarely within the body of literature that supports the case for evidence-based management (EBM), but it does little to encourage optimism about the chances for the success of EBM in the United States. In this article, I review the core elements of the analysis in the context of the European and, more particularly, the U.K. experience.

**U.S.–U.K. PARALLELS**

The first thing to note is that there are some distinct parallels between the United States and the United Kingdom with respect to intermediate publications. The U.K. equivalent to HR Magazine is People Management, a fortnightly magazine for members of the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD), the professional body for HR managers, with an audited readership of some 125,000. The nearest equivalent of Human Resource Management is the Human Resource Management Journal, published until recently by the same organization responsible for People Management, and explicitly designed to provide a bridge between academics and practitioners. There is no U.K. equivalent of the Harvard Business Review.

Making a quick cross-check, I reviewed the articles published since 2000 in the Human Resource Management Journal. They included none on goal setting and one, to which I return below, explaining the growth of psychometric testing. In a personal communication, the editorial team of People Management acknowledged that they have produced nothing on goal setting in recent years and that, although they have included a number of pieces about selection and testing, these are more likely to be cases of interesting practice rather than accounts of the latest research evidence. In other words, if one uses the same criteria for assessing the quantity and quality of relevant material in the intermediate U.K. publications, the situation is even worse than in the States.

More interestingly, the People Management editorial team deny that it is a central role of the magazine to provide reports on established academic evidence that supports specific practice, although they strongly support the importance of accurate reporting. Instead they see their role as providing news and information of interest and relevance to their readers. In other words, it is essentially a news magazine with a number of practice-oriented feature articles rather than a journal. This view has not stopped them in the past 12 months from publishing articles by Pfeffer, Ulrich, and others that address broader topics such as evidence-based HRM and the role of the HR function. Reader surveys confirm a particular interest in legal updates and in cases of organizations that are tackling challenges, solving HR problems, or innovating in distinctive ways. Perhaps more depressingly, their surveys also indicate that a third of the readership turns first to the job advertisements.

The editorial team also argue that it is outdated to consider the magazine as an effective medium for the communication of scientific evidence. Increasingly, they view themselves as a Web-based, desktop publishing organization that communicates
Solesbury argued that it is naïve in any organization to weigh a variety of factors when arriving at decisions. However, weighed alongside other sometimes more indeterminate but politically important factors. As in the United States, in the United Kingdom EBM is disputed territory, possibly to a greater extent. Critical management, which acknowledges the salience of issues like conflict, order, accommodation, and resistance and draws attention to how enduring social structures (e.g., the state or capitalism) are involved in work and organization and characterize social relations (Keegan & Boselie, 2006: 1496; see also Alvesson & Deetz, 2000), has a strong foothold in U.K. business schools and management departments (see, e.g., Grey & Willmott, 2005; Learmouth, 2006). Throughout Europe, a strong pluralist tradition is sustained, reinforced by legislative frameworks and the still-influential trade unions. This pluralism has resulted in challenges both to the nature of academic knowledge and to the view that academics should champion the dissemination of practices that might be effective in assisting management to act against what some might perceive to be the best interests of workers.

**ANALYSIS OF RYNES, GILUK, AND BROWN FROM A U.K. PERSPECTIVE**

The first central point in Rynes and coauthors’ article, based on their earlier research (Rynes et al., 2002), is that there are “a number of clear scientific findings” that senior HR managers are either not aware of or disagree with. A related point, based on the judgments obtained in a survey of 85 members of the editorial boards of leading academic journals, is that certain findings are particularly important or, as they define it, are among the “five most fundamental findings” that senior HR managers are either not aware of or disagree with. A related point, based on the judgments obtained in a survey of 85 members of the editorial boards of leading academic journals, is that certain findings are particularly important or, as they define it, are among the “five most fundamental findings” that senior HR managers should know” (Rynes et al., 2007: 989).

Members of the editorial boards of leading journals undoubtedly form an important and influential constituency. However, they may also represent a relatively narrow spread of established traditions within the positivist framework of these journals. If a sample had been drawn from the editorial boards of some of the Europe-based jour-
nals that address management issues, such as *Organization, Organizational Studies*, the *Journal of Management Studies*, and *Work, Employment and Society*. I suspect the results would have been very different.

For example, even within the narrower community of industrial/organization (I/O) psychologists in the United Kingdom and Europe, the role of personality testing and, in particular, of the “Big Five” personality dimensions continues to be disputed (see, e.g., Bartram, 2004; Blinkhorn & Johnson, 1990). Goal setting has also been criticized as inappropriate and restrictive for complex roles with ambiguous goals (Maitlis & Briner, 1995). Interestingly, the three findings that Rynes et al. endorse on the basis of consensus among researchers—namely, the roles of general intelligence, the Big Five personality factors, and goal setting—all fall at the I/O psychology end of organizational behavior and management. Several of the “near misses” they identify also concern aspects of selection and assessment. Located at the individual, micro level of analysis, they are feasible topics for the kinds of controlled experiments that typically contribute to the medical evidence base but that are impossible for ethical and practical reasons in many areas of management research.

The list presented by Rynes and colleagues presents a second problem, at least for this reader. If 85 academic experts responded to the survey request to provide the five most fundamental HR findings, then the outcome in which only five topics were mentioned more than 10 times, with the top three getting just over 20 mentions, does not imply an academic consensus about what constitutes fundamental findings. If the top three topics do not figure in the top five identified by over 60 of the 85 experts, we are far away from a consensus that we can communicate with confidence. In this case, we can hardly blame the practitioners for being somewhat confused; nor, perhaps, should we blame the intermediate publications if they fail to publish what turns out to be a very limited consensus view about “the five most fundamental findings from human resources research that all practicing managers should know” (Rynes et al., 2007: 989).

The second main point in the focal article is that intermediate journals might reasonably be expected to cover the topics for which the evidence about the impact of practice on outcomes is strong and do so accurately. As I have already noted, the editors of *People Management* dispute this point, on the grounds that it is not their job. In the case of *HRMJ*, the editor publishes positively reviewed articles that the predominantly academic population of authors chooses to submit. The absence of articles on the three identified topics is more likely to reflect a lack of submissions rather than any policy of avoiding them. In practice, in the U.K. and European context, papers on assessment and possibly also goal setting are more likely to be submitted to the *Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology* or to the *International Journal of Selection and Assessment*.

What Rynes and her coauthors perhaps did not highlight is that in the three areas of practice identified in their study, it took many years to establish the validity of the evidence. Therefore, by the time scholars can have confidence in the evidence, it no longer counts as new. An established area of accepted practice ceases to attract new research and ceases to be newsworthy.

One way of developing this analysis is to review the extent to which the evidence has already been communicated by one means or another and put into practice. There is some U.K. research that allows us to consider this. Indeed, the one article in *HRMJ* addressing the topic of psychometric testing is an analysis of why test use has increased in the United Kingdom (Wolf & Jenkins, 2006). Two key explanations are offered. One is the increasing knowledge and sophistication of the HR profession; the other is the growth of the regulatory framework in which psychometric testing is seen as a means of reducing risk.

The most authoritative source of information about test use is the British Workplace Employment Relations Survey (Kersley et al., 2006), which covers a representative sample of over 2,000 workplaces. The latest survey, in 2004, found that 46 percent of all workplaces used performance tests routinely for selection in some occupations. However, the users varied between 76 percent of workplaces employing 500 plus employees, and 39 percent of those employing only 10–25. Personality tests are used by 19 percent overall, but again, usage varies from between 56 percent of those employing 500 plus and 13 percent of those employing 10–25. These figures reflect a modest increase over previous years and confirm that psychometric testing has been known about and practiced for a number of years. By implication, it is no longer a new or newsworthy topic. Of course, this evidence does not tell us about the type of tests used, and it is possible, even probable, that these are sometimes inappropriate.

Rynes et al.’s final core point, based on their careful analysis of the U.S. evidence, is that the intermediate channels are failing to communicate EBM. The U.K. experience suggests plausible reasons for this lack and that understanding these reasons more fully calls for reflection on the con-
temporary range of media and the nature and timeliness of the information practitioners require. In particular, we academics need to consider EBM more carefully from a user perspective. As others have commented, most academics and practitioners are engaged in different activities and live in rather different worlds (Briner, 2000). However, there are exceptions. Many of us, as senior academics, are involved in the selection and management of other staff. Do we use psychometric tests as a matter of routine to assess the Big Five personality factors and general intelligence when we select academics and university administrators? Do we use goal setting in the manner advocated by Locke and Latham (1984)? I suspect the answer, at best, is “not always.” We have the evidence base but do not adopt the practice, and we can usually offer good reasons for this.

In the Rynes and colleagues study, the topic that emerged as third in the list of “fundamental findings,” surprisingly as far as I was concerned, was the finding that “HR practices are important to organizational outcomes” (Rynes et al., 2007: Table 1). I assume this statement addresses the association between HRM and performance. This association is concerned with a much broader issue than the micropractices that were more strongly endorsed, and it is a topic that continues to be highly disputed (Boselie, Dietz, & Boon, 2005; Cappelli & Neumark, 2001; Wall & Wood, 2005). As such, both People Management and the Human Resource Management Journal have regularly covered the HRM-performance association. Perhaps appropriately, the articles reflect the contentious nature of the evidence and therefore fail to provide a consistent message about best practice.

WHAT INFORMATION DO MANAGERS WANT?

Despite continuing debate about the relationship between HR practices and organization-level performance, the body of evidence has convinced the CIPD and the U.K. government, which have both sought to communicate the case for the adoption of “high-performance HR practices” to managers in general and to HR practitioners in particular. Yet the evidence (Kersley at al., 2006) shows only very modest increases in the adoption of the advocated practices. Guest and King (2004) explored why this should be so. They interviewed 48 senior U.K. managers to explore their perceptions of the association between HRM and organizational performance and how the managers have responded to the evidence. Most claimed to be aware of the evidence, suggesting that it had been effectively communicated to them, but very few have acted on it recently. The reasons they cite for this include a belief that they have already applied the relevant practices, scepticism about the evidence (particularly since they believe that HR is especially susceptible to short-term fads), other, more pressing priorities, and financial constraints.

Another major concern expressed by these managers was the desire for evidence of successful application from other organizations in their own sectors. Asked about the source of ideas and practices that they were likely to apply, the key source was other managers at the same level, either in their own or in other similar organizations in their sectors. Bankers were interested in evidence from banking and retailers in evidence from retailing. In other words, isomorphism (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983) was in operation. They looked for innovations from people like themselves in organizations like their own. The next logical question is, Where did these apparent innovators get their ideas about good practice from? Consultants were rarely cited; there was some reference to academics who acted as sounding boards and to the Harvard Business Review. But mostly adoption of new practices seemed to be put down to judgment based on implicit knowledge.

From this admittedly limited study, it appears that “local” sources of information about what constitutes best practices are most valued. A recent attempt was made to build on this preference for local information among HR managers in the U.K. health sector (Guest & Oakley, 2007). Walshe and Rundall (2001), noting the well-established tradition of evidence-based medicine, suggested that health care offered a particularly suitable context for evidence-based management. There has also been a large body of research, much of it promoted by government funding, on aspects of health service management. A series of workshops confirmed the importance of local evidence and identified a number of pressing topics on which solutions were sought, including staff retention, team working, and job redesign. However, the initiative floundered over the lack of any consistent evidence base or accumulation of evidence and over debates about how best to communicate the information.

For doctors, the publication Bandolier provides up-to-date reviews of the latest research on issues they are likely to confront as general practitioners in their day-to-day work, such as treatment of athlete’s foot or asthma. For HR practitioners, debate has centered partly around whether an equivalent should be pitched at the level of the Guardian or the Sun (the U.S. equivalents might be the New York Times and the New York Daily News—that is, a serious and a light read) and, again, around the
timeliness of information. A Web page would have been ideal and indeed was piloted, but it had to be populated with relevant local information of a sort that was not available. In short, there was insufficient good local evidence on which to base the initiative to package local information for HR professionals in health care.

Academics love evidence-based reviews, as a recent analysis of what gets cited has confirmed (Judge, Cable, Colbert, & Rynes, 2007). We should avoid believing that managers feel the same, and the intermediate publications have recognized this. On the basis of a crude analysis of what they do publish and subjective observation of what HR managers pay attention to, I would submit that these managers want the intermediate publications to provide three kinds of information. First, they want information that will help them solve their current pressing problems. Intermediate channels using traditional print are unlikely to provide this in a timely manner. Proserpio and Gioia (2007) argued that everyone is moving to a virtual world of communication and that the Web is the best medium to assist with this. The fact that responsible academics deny the existence of a suitable evidence base will not stop the publication or the advocacy by consultants of solutions to pressing problems.

Secondly, HR managers want “ways of looking” that provide them with fresh insights into their jobs. This is where the work of Ulrich (1997; Ulrich & Brockbank, 2005) has proved so popular for both its rhetoric and its analysis of the HR role. Another issue to which many people can relate is the psychological contract (Rousseau, 1995); Conway and Briner (2005) counted 20 articles on this topic in People Management in recent years. In the United Kingdom, current topics that appeal to HR managers include talent management and engagement of staff. Stripped down, these might be defined in terms of the use of psychometric testing to identify talent and the use of goal setting and knowledge about commitment and OCB to generate engagement. However, the key lies in the language and the re-presentation in a fresh way of established practices.

The third thing that HR managers are very responsive to is an emotional appeal that reinforces the value of what they do and offers a route to salvation or at least a solution to their problems (Guest & King, 2004). The job of the HR manager is notoriously challenging, partly because of limits on power and influence and partly because of role ambiguities, resulting, at least in part, from the precarious evidence base for such a manager’s activities. In theory, advocates of evidence-based management should be knocking on an open door, since this analysis suggests that HR professionals need all the help they can get. Instead, the latter may turn to the management gurus and their promises of solutions. As Abrahamson (1991) and others have noted, management gurus—through good timing, good storytelling, and effective marketing—communicate ideas. We scholars may be deeply skeptical of the ideas they communicate. But their novelty, emotional appeal, perceived relevance, and promises of pay-offs have helped to communicate to a wide audience on a range of issues such as leadership, quality, and culture. They purvey the hot, emotional topics alongside which psychometric testing and goal setting appear hard and cold. Unless we can dress them up, in the way that The One Minute Manager (Blanchard & Johnson, 1982) partly succeeded in doing for goal setting, we may have difficulty in utilizing intermediate channels of communication to get across our ideas. Ironically, it seems likely that the 1980s and 1990s were the age of the HR guru. Few new ones have emerged more recently; but the desire for information to be communicated in the style popularized by the management gurus highlights some lessons for academics, whether we like them or not.

**STEPS TO IMPROVE THE COMMUNICATION OF ACADEMIC KNOWLEDGE TO MANAGERS**

How then, should we proceed? This analysis points to a series of steps. First, we need to consider more critically how much consensus about good practice exists. If a group of established and informed academics can reach only limited agreement, even before we start taking account of those likely to adopt a more critical management stance, then we need to be very cautious in claiming knowledge as important and established. Secondly, we should be realistic about what the intermediate HR management publications can be expected to do. Both the material submitted to them and what their readers want constrain them. Thirdly, we should recognize that we live in an era of multiple channels of electronic communication, and Web pages and virtual media may be more appropriate channels for communicating knowledge about good practice by making it accessible to those who want it when they need it. In this context, the emerging Web-based initiatives on evidence-based management are to be welcomed (Rousseau, 2007). Fourthly, building on the old communication paradigm, we need to be mindful of the communicator, the message, and the medium, but also, and in particular, the receiver. Academics may need to pay stronger attention to the perspective of practi-
tioners and to be more responsive to their needs. If we can not engage their interest, no amount of high-quality research will make much difference.

Anderson (2007), reflecting on a debate in the pages of the *Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology* on the academic-practitioner divide, suggested that we need to build a whole range of bridges incorporating not only traditional approaches (e.g., greater use of a range of media, sabbaticals, and joint projects and research), but also more strategic activities (e.g., deliberate attempts to join government commissions and working parties, greater involvement in research councils, and closer contacts with consultancy organizations). The other burgeoning approach across Europe and the United States is the use of joint forums and networks, often attached to universities or specific interest groups, through which academics can communicate relevant knowledge and also the occasional cautionary advice to practitioners while also informing themselves about the issues of current practitioner concern. The strategic links may be more feasible in smaller countries than the United States, and the United Kingdom is fortunate in having a body like the Economic and Social Research Council that can help to foster these kinds of exchanges.

Beyond this, I would strongly endorse the approach advocated by Rousseau and McCarthy (2007). What is needed is the development of a critical and inquiring capacity for proper diagnosis among HR specialists and an awareness of where to go to obtain the appropriate evidence. If scholars do not provide this, partly through the educational process, then the specialists will look in the wrong places or listen to the wrong people. We should not be shooting the messengers—the intermediate publications; we should be developing learned resourcefulness in our HR communities to enable them to evaluate information and seek out relevant evidence.

Our first tentative moves toward evidence-based management and the concern of Rynes, Giluk, and Brown for the way in which it is communicated by intermediate channels are surely steps in the right direction. However, it is essential that the academic community utilize a range of channels that reflect the contemporary virtual world. We should also not forget that evidence in the social sciences is always likely to be contested. The European experience reinforces the view that consensus building over multiple and often competing interest groups is never going to be easy, and we should temper our aspirations and enthusiasms accordingly. If we can achieve an increase in evidence-informed HR and more general management practice, we should be pleased. For now, at least given the available evidence, evidence-based practice in HR management may be a step too ambitious.

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David E. Guest (david.guest@kcl.ac.uk) is a professor of organizational psychology and human resource management in the Department of Management at King’s College, London. He received his Ph.D. from Birkbeck College, University of London. His research interests include the individualization of employment relations and the role of the psychological contract, employment contracts and employee well-being, HRM and organizational performance, and partnership at work.