The evidence-based management movement has HR in its sights. But is the profession willing or able to become more evidence-based? By KATIE JACOBS

Eric Barends was working on a change programme in a large organisation when he first got the feeling something wasn’t quite right. “Three directors were appointed to manage the change and they all had completely different views on how it should be managed,” he recalls. “I thought, ‘how can it be possible to have three different approaches to solving the problem of transition?’ Imagine being in hospital and having three doctors, all with different ideas of the best treatment.”

Intrigued to learn more about the decision-making process, Barends asked the three where they were getting their ideas. “Nine times out of 10, it was down to personal experience or one survey they’d read.” Perturbed by the lack of substantial evidence, Barends started his own research into critical thinking and decision making. He eventually came across the concept of evidence-based medicine.

Evidence-based medicine emphasises the use of evidence from robust research in healthcare decision making. Originally coined in the 1960s, the prefix ‘evidence-based’ has detached itself somewhat from medicine, and can now be found attached to fields as varied as education, criminology, conservation and management. The catch-all term is ‘evidence-based practice’. Barends, who in 2011 set up the Center for Evidence-Based Management, refers to such practice as “an activist thing”. “Evidence-based practice is fighting against fallacy and fads,” he adds.

Given that definition, perhaps it’s no surprise academics are now keen to spread the practice and understanding of ‘evidence-based HR’ (EBHR). Rob Briner, professor of organisational psychology at Bath University’s School of Management, says HR is like “any area with a lot of fads – not very evidence-based and lurching from one thing to another”.

A new paradigm

Briner adds that evidence-based management is “not a wild and crazy concept”. “The term ‘evidence-based’ describes something people always do, which is basing decisions on information, but doing more of it, doing it better and doing it more critically,” he says. Indeed, as Barends points out, “it can be seen as common sense”, but, he adds, “the more you dig into it, the more you see it’s a completely new paradigm”.

Denise Rousseau, H.J. Heinz II professor of organisational behaviour and public policy at the US’s Carnegie Mellon University, explains: “The real issue in this movement is to call attention to the quality of the evidence...
people are using. If you ask HR practitioners if they are paying attention to the quality of their evidence, it knocks them back.” Rousseau describes EBHR as “being concerned with using the best available evidence in making decisions pertaining to HR profession and practice”. Four equally important areas should provide input into that decision-making process, and all four should be assessed critically and systematically (see box, below). They are: external academic and scientific evidence in the field of HR, good quality internal data from your own organisation (hard and soft metrics), professional expertise and experience built up over your own career, and the values of stakeholders (ethical and practical concerns – it’s the right thing to do for your people).

Consensus from academics is that working in a more evidence-based fashion leads to better quality decision making, increased organisation (hard and soft metrics), and scientific evidence in the field of HR, important areas should provide input into HR profession and practice. Four equally research projects in his own organisation, stating “It’s not rocket science; it’s a more strategic evidence will make our case,” adds Rousseau. In a more evidence-based fashion leads to in question and, in Briner’s words, could “stop better quality decision making, increased in a more evidence-based fashion leads to in the blue circles below. Once obtained, According to the experts, there are four places from which to draw your evidence, in the blue circles below. Once obtained, use the six AS (in the red circle) to assess evidence quality.

The four sources of evidence

According to the experts, there are four places from which to draw your evidence, in the blue circles below. Once obtained, use the six AS (in the red circle) to assess evidence quality.

Scientific research findings

Organisational data, factual figures

Professional experience and judgment

Stakeholder values and concerns

ASK ASSESS APPRAISE AGREE APPLY

2. Consider alternative approaches. Before engaging in an approach, question your assumptions and consider at least two alternative approaches to the issue.

3. Rethink priorities. Have you tried something like this before? How did it work out? Have we any reason to think it will be different this time?

4. Make the logic explicit. Write down the logic behind the choices you are making. Why, and how will they work?

5. Use some numbers. What numbers do you have or can you estimate that are relevant to the decision?

6. What has been the impact of this practice – positive, negative or unclear? What diagnostic information or external research evidence informed it?

Source: Wendy Hirsh for the Corporate Research Forum

According to Wendy Hirsh’s 2011 Corporate Research Forum Evidence-Based HR: Four For Facts, the following questions can help you become more evidence-based in your practice.

Becoming more evidence-based: The questions to ask yourself

According to Wendy Hirsh’s 2011 Corporate Research Forum Evidence-Based HR: Four For Facts, the following questions can help you become more evidence-based in your practice.

Questions to ask before making a decision

1. What is important about the context? Which employees have the practice been used for how many and over what period of time?

2. What has been the impact of this practice – positive, negative or unclear? What diagnostic information or external research evidence informed it?

3. Why have you chosen this approach? Why did you think it would work?

4. What has been the impact of this practice – positive, negative or unclear? What diagnostic information or external research evidence informed it?

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Source: Wendy Hirsh for the Corporate Research Forum

A lot of senior HR people have based their career on saying yes and not challenging

In 2011: “Being evidence-based is partly about how professionals see themselves.”

Back in 2011, Hirsh wrote: “The jury is out on whether EBHR will take off. We need a period of co-evolution in the idea. Although academics endorsed the phrase, practitioners will need to make it their own before they commit much effort to thinking or behaving differently.”

Speaking three years on, Hirsh believes EBHR “is a journey, not a destination”. “This is also a mindset,” she adds. “Do HR people see themselves as professionals, in terms of critical thinking and reflective practice?”

Looking for evidence

Leading-edge practitioners would say they do. “I believe evidence,” says Euginia Pirri, VP HR and OD at The Dorchester Collection. “We live in an age where there is no reason not to have data and evidence around what you decide to do, or to figure out and examine your key metrics.” Pirri herself has worked with New York’s Cornell University on research projects in his own organisation, including linking employee and guest satisfaction to drive performance. “You can’t go forward unless you know what your insight is going to be and what you want to achieve,” she adds. “It’s all very well to say ‘I want X’, but why do you want it?”

He adds. “It’s all very well to say ‘I want X’, but why do you want it!”

This echoes one of the most critical areas for getting EBHR right: starting with the right question, which is often “How do we know we have a problem?” Jeffrey Pfeffer is Thomas D. Dee Professor of organisational behaviour at the Stanford Graduate School of Business. Having studied organisations and management for decades, he feels that all too often “HR is still using a theoretical framework of ‘best practice’ has really inhibited EBHR.”

For Kears, “the HR community is still trying to bide behind best practice”, which means “there’s a bigger need for EBHR than ever before”. Rousseau compares the proliferation of fads in HR to “voodoo”. “If you don’t understand science, why not follow voodoo?” she adds. “Saying it’s what everyone else is doing and I’m on the mindet to think like their peers to cover up for a lack of knowledge.”

Many of the academics HR magazine spoke to were also rather dismissive of consultancies, accusing many of peddling products based on dubious ‘best practice’ without robust evidence behind them. “We must not have data and evidence to back up claims,” Pirri says. “The suspicion of ‘best practice’ extends to all areas of management, not just HR.”

When it comes to how HR can achieve what D’Souza describes, it requires a mixed bag of tricks. One of the problems with EBHR and evidence-based management is it can risk sounding as though academics are simply complaining – frustrated about the lack of attention practitioners are paying to their work. This is the impression business author David Bolchover, who is working on a report consultant David D’Souza. He first became interested in EBHR based years ago when working in-house at an international business, exploring broader sources of evidence to figure out what practices weren’t having the desired impact. “Having hard science sitting behind [what we do] is a beguiling prospect, but there are issues that aren’t being as well-articulated as they could be,” he adds. “The modern HR professional needs to be able to separate the fact from fiction, signal from noise and commercial opportunity from fad.”

An academic issue

Questions to ask when working on HR policies and practices

1. What is important about the context? Which employees have the practice been used for how many and over what period of time?

2. What has been the impact of this practice – positive, negative or unclear? What diagnostic information or external research evidence informed it?

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EBHR in practice

Maxine Loose, internal HR and OD consultant at the Government of Flanders, on how he used EBHR in practice:

Before I got into HR, I was a researcher and worked in occupational psychology. When I came into HR, I was told that HR was a practice-oriented field, not a science. So far, we’ve done projects around whether we really had a problem with burnout in the organisation and used evidence to come up with a better process for identifying high potentials. We are currently working on a project looking at how open work spaces affect productivity and another about whether autonomous teams impact on customer satisfaction.

Data is really important, but it is not the only source of evidence. Scientific literature is important in helping you to test your hypothesis and give context and meaning to organisational data. It’s not only about numbers but aggregating all forms of evidence. It’s like proving a case in court. There are two reasons why this is important for us. Firstly, the government is under a lot of pressure; there’s a lot of debate around how efficient and effective it is. Evidence-based management can ensure the decisions we make are more effective and efficient.

There is also a matter of professional integrity. As HR professionals and managers, we are making decisions that impact on people’s lives and the results of the organisation. When we make a decision, we need to ensure we make the best decision. This methodology helps you to make the best possible decision. And I think it’s important we make HR a profession.

on the subject, has gained. “The thing that really struck me is this big divide between HR academics and practitioners,” he says. “HR academics who have been researching evidence-based research for decades are annoyed that HR practitioners are ignoring that they write.”

Hirsh believes one of the issues is that there is “no clear academic canon around what HR professionals need to know”, and that what exists isn’t the easiest of reads. “Areas like reward and engagement are hotly contested within the academic community,” she explains. “We sometimes know what correlates, but not what causes. Looking externally for evidence to support practice is really problematic for practitioners. There is not that middle ground [of research] that really resonates with practitioners, telling them what they need to know from the research evidence, but in terms they can reasonably apply.”

Hirsh says that she would like to see HR practitioners doing more “experiments” on their workforces. By this, she means less clinical trials, more about trying things like tailoring a practice in one area of the organisation, such as in one country or site, and not in another to see how the results differ.

Salisbury bemoans the fact he is, in his experience, one of a shrinking number of HR practitioners who read academic books and journals. “I do worry we are witnessing the death of book and journal reading habits in the HR profession,” he says. “But there’s a belief academics often write for other academics.” “There are not many areas where academics are writing for HR professionals,” he adds. “There’s something that needs to be done to meet in the middle.”

And while Piri believes HR leaders need to proactively work with business schools and universities in HRM research, he calls on more academics to communicate directly into businesses. “They can theorise all they want, but they need to understand how our businesses work,” he points out.

There is an acknowledgement of this from the academic community. Guest appreciates that “we [academics] should be doing a lot more” to engage practitioners. “We need to communicate more effectively, writing in a more accessible way,” he says. “We have to get down among the practitioners.”

An important message is that academics need to engage and communicate their research. “There is an acknowledgement of this from the academic community,” Guest appreciates that “we [academics] should be doing a lot more” to engage practitioners. “We need to communicate more effectively, writing in a more accessible way,” he says. “We have to get down among the practitioners.”

The internal data solution

For Sara Rynes, John F. Murray professor of management at the University of Iowa’s Henry B. Tippie College of Business, there is a lack of evidence in the recruitment literature. “We have too many people interested in evidence in lies in making the most of internal organisational data and metrics. They are not going to read academic research, we have to find some other way of creating evidence-based management and influence the decision-making processes,” she says.

This requires intelligent analysis of data – not merely collecting reams of management information or buying a fancy analytics system. “Start with what the problem is,” says Rynes. “Get thinking about the stuff you want to fix. Then there are all sorts of ways how can you get the data.” But both Briner and Rousseau add that for truly EBHR, while internal data is useful, it should not be the only source of evidence for three areas.

In practice, there are naturally some areas of HR in which it is easier to start working in an evidence-based way. Academics have pushed for site selection and recruitment as one such area, due to the amount of research and data available on the approaches, meaning it can be easier to make an impact quickly. Rynes also points out that “people adversely affected by [the recruitment] process don’t buy employees’ it can make sense to start experimenting with evidence-based practice in this area.

However, despite the majority of all is a mindset shift, the ability to think analytically, see HR data in a wider context and use it to test hypotheses, he adds. “We know way more about selection, but the predominant way of hiring people is still through gut reaction, and that is so not evidence-based,” sighs Rynes. Pfeffer calls out the fact that “most companies don’t even measure the success of their recruitment processes” by failing to link recruitment evidence to retention and performance.

“Academics need to be engaged in their industry and not just publishing”

Thinking like a scientist

It’s also, in Pfeffer’s words, about “thinking like a scientist” rather than persisting in “thinking like a clerk”.

Piri, who has a background in operations and finance, agrees a lot of HR professionals “haven’t been taught how to get evidence, and don’t have systematic approach.” “They don’t understand the thought process and can get nervous, which is why they hide behind best practice and don’t do a lot of research.”

Thinking like a scientist and engaging in ‘mindful practice’ means being intellectually curious and persistently questioning ‘known knowns’. “If you ask ‘why’ it means you are on the way to becoming an evidence-based practitioners,” says Briner. “If you say, my boss told me, I read it somewhere, or a consultant said it, and so it must be true, you are not.”

Critical thinkers are more likely to be aware you can start with the wrong question,” says Rousseau, who is “able to ask good questions about why something is needed.” Hirsh believes experts should be trying to help practitioners frame better questions, “rather than jumping in and asking ‘where is the evidence’, which can naturally lead to defensiveness.” If you are being benchmarked, you need to ask better questions,” she says. “You need to start with the issues being addressed, their context and how you might address progress.” (See box on p27 for more photos.)

What is required is a mindset shift, the ability to see HR data in a wider context

Are you a reflective practitioner?

To develop a mindful, evidence-based practice, ask yourself if you do the following:

1. I question my opinions and biases
2. I understand the effects of my actions on others and the business
3. I am continuously learning and developing myself
4. I am critical about what I do

Source: Shane Hinds, for the Corporate Research Forum

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The HR knowledge gap

According to research by Sara Rynes, the HR community can be poorly informed about what the scientific evidence is for key HR practices. Test yourself with the following statements from her study. Answers are below, and you can compare yourself to the 959 senior HR practitioners who took part in the study.

True or false

1. On average, engaging employees to participate in decision making is more effective for improving organisational performance than setting performance goals.
2. Being very intelligent is a disadvantage for performing well on a low-skilled job.
3. Conscientiousness is a better predictor of job performance than intelligence.
4. Most employers prefer to be paid on the basis of individual performance rather than on team or organisational performance.
5. Although staff differ in their personalities, there are really only four basic dimensions of personality, as captured by the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator.
6. Integrity tests do not work because employees lie on them.
7. Companies with vision statements perform better than those without them.

If you ask questions you need the support of your team

If it is a truthful thing. If you ask a truthful question, you need the support of your group, team and organisation. People can get annoyed if you say something that does not fit right and says much of the time. It does depend and it’s your job to work out what it depends on.

Roussseau believes senior HR practitioners need to take the lead in this field, as they have the luxury of freedom and autonomy.

They are the best able to take the first step into evidence-based practice as they have control over their own practice.

She adds that the “freebie benefits” of this type of practice come quickly. Even if you consider one alternative, the quality of your decision goes up.

Roussseau believes it is significant that in this still-emerging area HR is taking centre stage, in academic work at least. "Generally evidence in people management is problematic and that is why, interestingly and positively, the HR side of things is having to lead the whole of the evidence-based management movement.

However, he adds that although this should be "very exciting" for HR professionals, he remains sceptical over whether many are actually interested.

Roussseau is far more positive about the potential rise of EHBH. She points out that the whole area is still less than 10 years old. The change is huge and, as we are starting to see take up, she says. "This is still a new movement. It took a generation of physicians to base their practice on evidence-based medicine. This will take a generation of enlightened managers.

Whether or not many of those enlightened managers will come from the HR community remains to be seen. Can HR be truly evidence-based? To echo Briner, it depends. It depends on practitioners and professional bodies moving towards the professionalisation of the function. It depends on society entrusting workers with practitioners to produce truly useful and accessible bodies of evidence and it depends on HR enhancing capability to create insightful data analysis.

And as debates continue over the future of HR, some argue that it is perhaps worth keeping 'Piffers Law', coined in his 2006 book 'The Knowing-Doing Gap', front of mind: "Instead of being interested in what is new, we ought to be interested in what is true." HR

What's the evidence for... evidence-based HR?

In the first of a series of columns, ROB BRINER, professor of organisational psychology at Bath University's School of Management, explores the case for evidence-based HR

This is where being judicious comes in. We should never just take evidence on trust even if it’s from a seasoned practitioner, someone one might respect, a management guru, a well-established consultancy firm, or a leading management journal. Likewise we should not dismiss evidence if it contradicts or challenges our existing beliefs.

Is HR evidence-based?

HR has a long way to go before it could describe itself accurately as strongly evidence-based. The systematic use of good quality organisational information is something HR is still getting to grips with through analytics. The popularity and uptake of HR fads shows that HR as a profession has some way to go in its ability to critically evaluate the trustworthy of evidence.

While HR does make some use of some of these sources of evidence, most obviously professional experience and evidence from the organisation, it makes less use of others – in particular scientific findings. In my opinion, HR is evidence-based a bit, but not enough.

Does it work?

The simple logic of evidence-based practice is that using more, better quality relevant evidence from more sources is more likely to result in more accurate problem identification and better decision-making outcomes. Put simply you’re more likely to result in more accurate problem identification and better quality relevant evidence from more sources. The simple logic of evidence-based practice is that using more, better quality relevant evidence from more sources is more likely to result in more accurate problem identification and better decision-making outcomes.

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