Developing an Evidence-Based HRM
Through the Conscientious Reliance on Evidence, Sound Decision Process, and Stakeholders Perspectives

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I am going to make a case for the future of Human Resource Management as an Evidence-Based Practice. As applied in fields as diverse as medicine, criminology and education, evidence-based practice means the conscientious use of scientific knowledge, organizational facts, valid decision processes and judgment honed through reflection and experience, with attention to stakeholder concerns in the decisions made. In effect, this means that the HRM of the future will be conducted increasingly by practitioners who act as professionals. To be professional in one’s work is to rely on specialized knowledge acquired through education and life-long learning, to reflectively develop over time the ability to make well-informed judgments, and to adhere to a code of ethics.

Many Flavors of HRM
Still, HRM is no monolith. Like a lot of organizational endeavors, HRM practice today is a mixed bag. Some of its practitioners have considerable professional education in the domain. Others have very little. Some are up-to-date in the psychology of human development, selection and assessment, know the works of Wayne Cascio or Dave Ulrich cold, and do statistical analyses with ease. Others lack a technical background in HR and are afraid of numbers. Some folks act as partners proactively developing, evaluating, and redesigning HRM programs to better support their organization and its members. Others are compliantly bureaucratic letting the legal department and company custom drive their practice. Many more practice HRM somewhere in the middle. HRM practitioners in big organizations and small, public and private, in the Americas, Asia, and Europe, do a lot of things differently. But evidence-based practice is adaptable by all.

Innovators and Early Adopters on the Leading Edge of HRM
When we talk about the Future of HRM, we are looking ahead to those firms whose HRM practitioners make the acquisition, development and use of knowledge the cornerstone of their strategic and professional practice. These savvy (defined as “well-informed and perceptive”) organizations can be as varied as corporations like the Gap or Royal Bank of Canada and nonprofits as varied as DonorsChoose or the US Army. These sentinel organizations use scientific principles in selecting and developing talented people (and in many more HRM activities) and systematically gather organizational data to assess the results. Along the way, their practitioners are redefining what it means to be an HRM professional.

So What Is It That Evidence-Based HRM Practitioners (Will) Do?
EBHRM practitioners know that tradition, authority and taken-for-granted assumptions about what works (and what won’t) just won’t cut it in a more complicated world. They know that
shiny object syndrome, that is, chasing the latest hot new fad in HR, is likely to be a waste of time. (Engagement, anyone?) They know it takes conscientious and cumulative effort to bring greater value to the organization and its members in the way work gets done. To effectively organize people and work in complex organizations requires a bundle of mutually reinforcing practices and systems. Developing these requires sound knowledge of both science and the local setting.

Evidence-based HR practitioners understand they cannot know everything upfront that sound decisions require. But they do know how to identify the questions that need answers in order to make a good decision or resolve a problem--or to advise others in doing so. Asking the right questions is a matter of critical thinking, to get beyond assumptions and old habits in order to identify potential drivers of good decisions. A big issue here is to go beyond the easily available data from last quarter’s financials or the most recent glitch everybody is talking about. Organizations are full of mysteries! An EBHRM practitioner is part of scientist and part detective. Are ethics complaints going up from year to year? OK, so what questions might we need to answer? (Hm, do these complaints continue despite the ethics program every new manager attends?)

Of course EBHRM practitioners also know how to get answers to those questions. This means being able to search the scientific research related to their questions (www.googlescholar; www.CEBMa.org). They are able to appraise the relevance and value of the research they find. But they also realize that their own organization is a source of important evidence. (It might be worthwhile to read that stack of ethics complaints to see if any patterns exist. An EBHRM practitioner did just that and found that most came from employees complaining of mistreatment by their boss.) Obtaining, analyzing and interpreting organizational evidence related to important practice questions are on-going activities for EBHRM practitioners.

Relatedly, EBHRM practitioners know how to run experiments to figure out what decision or solution might work in their organization. Looking to resolve the ethics issues employees were raising, that conscientious EBHRM practitioner identified the business units with the highest rates of complaints and after further inquiry began developing a training program targeting improved procedural justice and managerial trustworthiness. The training was rolled out in a way that randomized participation over several waves allowing managers trained later to serve as controls for those trained earlier. Doing experiments to test out ideas is likely to become increasingly important in the future. Experiments are key when situations arise for which there is no precedent (that is, no research, no existing data, no relevant prior experience). In truly novel circumstances, the only way forward is to learning by doing. Little wonder that the US Army systematically used after action reviews to figure out what worked and what didn’t when confronted with a challenge few armies had ever successfully dealt with before—peacekeeping in Haiti, Bosnia and elsewhere.

Evidence-based HR practitioners know how to bring the array of stakeholders together to integrate their perspectives into the decision process. Part of being evidence-based is recognizing that human judgment is fundamentally fallible. Decisions often have implications invisible to the decision maker, a particular problem in companies where pressures can narrow the alternatives considered and limit the evidence weighed. Matters blocked out of by
one decision maker’s mindset can create real trouble when the decision is carried out. Getting input from employees and managers at different levels, community members, and clients can help balance out immediate situational pressures and the narrowing of judgment for decision makers under stress. A given decision can involve multiple objectives, leading to trade-offs between cost and human wellbeing, and between short and long-term goals. Its increasingly part of evidence-based practice to pay explicit attention to multiple objectives when framing decisions in order to help resolve ambiguities that decision makers routinely face. This consideration of diverse interests and potential trade-offs often leads to the use of higher-quality evidence. A key idea here is that attention to diverse stakeholder concerns can help address the ethical issues associated with HRM decisions, where harm that might otherwise be done can be prevented by deliberately reaching out to stakeholders with a different vantage point.

Last, evidence-based HRM practitioners don’t just make better decisions they manage their decisions better. They know when to use systematic, that is, slow and careful decision making processes, especially when critical information is widely distributed across sources and stakeholders (where to locate a new facility, how to reconcile the different HRM systems of newly merged business units). They know when fast decision making can yield good outcomes. This is the case where strong evidence already exists about what works. In these familiar situations, EBHRM practitioners recognize the value of developing and implementing routines and checklists around repeat activities (how to run a meeting, develop a training program, give feedback, or make a change in HRM policy). They also know how to deal with truly novel situations where no good information exists in the organization or in science—learning by doing, evaluating the results, and adapting as you go.

**Madam ZaZa Predicts the Future**

Just so you know, I am not pulling these notions out of my hat. I meet such HRM practitioners regularly through a variety of EBHRM communities in North America and Europe. These communities have formed around the use of data analytics, rapid evidence reviews and decision supports tools in order to improve the quality of HRM-related decisions and practices—all under the umbrella of evidence-based practice. In truth, I may manifest the availability bias that Daniel Kahneman describes in *Thinking Fast and Slow*. But as is the case of many innovative trends that have historical forces behind them—from automation to globalization—the signs of their trajectory can be visible years before. The force for greater evidence use in professional practice is observable in the evidence-based practice movement that began in medicine in the late 1980s. It has joined with another escalating force promoting access to scientific and other evidence (and a lot else), that is to say, the Internet. And last but not least, these forces reinforce and are supported in turn by yet another trend toward demanding increasing accountability, that is, the expectation that decisions, corporate as well as public, should be justifiable, fact-based, and transparent. (Of course, one hazard of trends is mimicry and cheap knockoffs, so I am not too disturbed by ads touting “evidence-based fitness!”) Thus, I suggest that the way forward for HRM will be led by the professional HRM practitioner, an innovator, adopter, and community member in evidence-based practice.