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**WHY HR PRACTICES ARE NOT  
EVIDENCE-BASED**

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**EDWARD E. LAWLER III**  
*Center for Effective Organizations  
Marshall School of Business  
University of Southern California*

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The difference between the academic literature and the practitioner literature on human resource management is an indicator and one cause of the major separation that exists between research and practice in human resource management. A great deal of what passes as “best practice” in human resource management most likely is not according to the research literature. In some cases, there is simply no evidence that validates what are thought to be best practices, while in other cases there is evidence to suggest that what are thought to be best practices are inferior practices. In short, most organizations do not practice evidence-based human resource management. As a result, they often under-perform with respect to their key stakeholders: employees, investors and the community.

There is no easy or simple way to reduce the separation between research and practice. It is the result of multiple realities that lead to a world in which decision makers in organizations are not aware of, and therefore, are not influenced by much of the research that has been done in the area of human resource management. To a significant extent, this is the result of the type of research that is being done. But this certainly is not the only cause. Even where research results are known and have clear implications for practice, they may not impact practice because they run counter to what practitioners prefer to do or believe is right (when it comes to people, everyone is an expert!). A brief review of the major forces that work against evidence-based human resource management (EBM) will serve to illustrate why it is so difficult to create EBM and to suggest some changes that might increase the degree to which EBM is practiced.

### **Why Publications are not Evidence-Based**

The Rynes, Giluk, and Brown article does a very convincing job of demonstrating just how separate the worlds of academic and practitioner publications are with respect to three content areas. I think the same results would have appeared if any of the major research areas in organizational behavior had been studied. As a result of the separation between academic and practitioner publications, much of the research done by academics is not visible to practitioners. There is no question that publications like *HR Magazine* could, and perhaps should, spend more time on research evidence; they could, for example, focus more on under-utilized research knowledge.

But the reality is that this magazine and the other leading HR magazines and newsletters are written by journalists who are asked to report on current events and their impact on HR. New research findings represent only a small portion of the changes in the world that HR executives “need” to be aware of. Well-established research findings are hardly the kind of “news” that magazines tend to focus on. Indeed, the fact that a finding is well-known (even if it is only among academics) almost immediately makes it uninteresting to the people who write and edit news publications. The three issues studied by Rynes, Giluk, and Brown are “old” news. Yes, research on them continues, but it is largely research that focuses on refinements, not on the kind of discoveries that can guide practice.

Many jobs in HR are largely transactional. The reason for this is rather straightforward: many of the day-to-day activities in the HR departments of organizations are administrative and do not involve the utilization of scientific knowledge (Lawler, Boudreau, and Mohrman, 2006).

Employees have to be paid, have their benefits managed, training programs have to be run, and a host of other administrative activities have to be done. They end up dominating the agenda of HR departments.

The development of new information technology-based HR systems is changing the type of work HR departments do, but when all is said and done, the vast majority of individuals in HR functions are not in a position to practice EBM in their day-to-day work lives (Lawler, Ulrich, Fitz-enz, and Madden, 2004). Thus, it is hardly surprising that publications that are directed to them do not have a great deal of content that educates them about the major research findings in human resource management.

In summary, it is hardly surprising that most of the well-established research findings in human resource management are not covered by the most visible HR practitioner publications. This is unlikely to change, given the pressures for circulation that these magazines face and the desire of most HR practitioners to read about the latest events, nor perhaps should it.

### **Education and Training in HR**

A strong case can be made that research findings in HR should be known by HR practitioners as a result of their education and training. Unfortunately, many HR practitioners lack any form of education in organizational behavior and human resources management. HR is very much an emerging profession, and as a result, it struggles to define a body of knowledge that every

practitioner should know. Only recently have certification programs for the body of knowledge that HR professionals need to know been developed. The identification of HR competencies has come a long way thanks to the efforts of SHRM, the publisher of *HR Management*, but it is the field has a long way to go before it will be dominated by well-trained professionals (Grossman, 2007).

No one knows exactly how many HR practitioners there are in the United States, but it is at least double the over 200,000 individuals who are members of SHRM. Less than half the members of SHRM have earned one of their certificates, which is partially based on acquiring the kind of knowledge that is needed in order to practice EBM. Many individuals stay in HR for only a short period of time. They do not consider themselves to be professionals in HR management, nor do they have professional knowledge. SHRM has a year-to-year member retention rate of about 80%, in part because many people spend only a short period of time in the HR function.

### **Role of Senior HR Executives**

The senior managers in HR who make HR system design decisions are potentially the major market for research that leads to EBM. They design systems and make decisions that in many cases can and should be informed by research. These jobs are sometimes filled with professionals who have advanced degrees in psychology or human resource management, but often they are not. Approximately 25% of the senior HR positions in major U.S. corporations are filled with someone who has little or no background in HR (Lawler, Boudreau, and Mohrman, 2006). They are unlikely to have the kind of knowledge about the research findings

that would permit them to shape the management practices of companies, so that they are evidence based.

There are several reasons why senior management positions in corporations may not be filled with HR professionals who have backgrounds in HR. Perhaps the major reason is that organizations use senior HR positions for a variety of purposes, including training general managers and unfortunately, in some cases, as a place to put failed senior managers prior to their retirement or departure from the organization. All too often, organizations do not see the senior HR position as one that requires a highly trained, knowledgeable professional. Fortunately, this is changing, and in the future, there is an increasing chance that senior HR jobs will be filled by individuals who can practice EBM.

Having knowledgeable HR executives is a necessary, but not sufficient, step when it comes to organizations practicing EBM. It can only exist in corporations if there is a general acceptance that practicing EBM is possible, desirable, and a potential source of competitive advantage. In other words, it requires knowledgeable managers, both in the HR function and in general management. With the increase in university-based business education, it may be that more EBM will in fact occur, because managers will accept it, if not demand it, but this is far from certain.

## **Management Education**

Business schools often do not provide courses that feature evidence-based HR management. As a result, managers who have gotten MBAs or bachelor degrees in Business may not be familiar with the research findings in organizational behavior and HR. Even those individuals who want to have careers in HR often do not have available to them courses that give them a good overview of the existing research, much less the kind of education that would allow them to understand research and translate it into management practice (Bennis and O'Toole, 2005; Rousseau and McCarthy, 2007). This may change when and if business schools see a strong market for individuals trained in evidence-based human resource management. At the present time, HR jobs tend to be relatively low paying and are not the ones that business schools are particularly interested in having their graduates placed in.

### **Research and Practice**

Last but not least, when it comes to why EBM is not practiced is the type of research that is done in organizational behavior and human resource management. In order to have evidence-based management, research has to inform practice in a meaningful way. The good news is that more and more research is being done on organizational behavior and human resource management. The number of academic journals and publications continue to expand and proliferate. The bad news is that much of research being published in journals is unlikely to inform practice in a way that will lead to EBM. The methodological rigor continues to increase as better and more complex statistical analyses are done. But a great deal of the research is focused on fine-tuning previous research and on issues that have little chance of informing and improving practice (Cummings, 2007).

What is rewarded in academia today are studies that are highly rigorous; whether they are relevant to management practice rarely seems to be an issue (Mitchell, 2007). The academic journals are full of articles that may score high on rigor and relevance to theory, but all too often score poorly on informing practice. Every assistant professor at a major university knows that achieving tenure depends on having the right number of papers published in “A” journals, not in having research that influences practice. This reality is a major contributor to the separation of the world of academic and practitioner publications.

### **Rewards for Publishing**

The division between research and practice is solidified by the fact that most faculty members are not rewarded for publishing in practitioner journals and writing books that are directed at practice. Indeed, publishing practice-related articles and books may actually be held against them when it comes time for tenure decisions. When a researcher publishes in a practitioner journal, questions are often raised about why they spent their time doing it and whether the research was sufficiently theoretically relevant and rigorous. The suspicion is that if it can be translated into material for a practitioner journal and has clear implications for practice, and then it may not be good academic research.

Because of the type of publication pressure that many faculty members are under, many have stopped focusing on the translation of research into practice and doing research that contributes to practice. It is not high on their agenda. As a result, even if practitioners and practitioner

publications want to learn from research, the simple fact is that the cupboard may be relatively bare when it comes to research that they can learn from.

It is worth adding a final point about the type of research that is particularly likely to guide practice in human resource management. Research that focuses on the organizational performance consequences of practices is clearly the type that is most likely to inform management practice; that is, research that shows the financial and operational consequences of different human resource management practices (Boudreau and Ramstad, 2007). For example, rather than simply saying that a certain selection approach improves the selection process, the most useful research goes on to show that the performance difference between individuals who are selected by one approach is X% higher than those selected by another and that this has a financial benefit to the company of X\$. In short, it focuses on the organizational performance outcomes of improvements to practice. It doesn't simply say what a good practice is and what a bad practice is. As Rynes, Giluk, and Brown point out, big picture research, which focuses on the strategic organizational level, often generates the most interest among practitioners, but it is rarely done.

Gathering the type of research data that will influence practice usually requires field research that uses an action or evaluation research approach (Lawler, Mohrman, Mohrman, Ledford, and Cummings, 1999). This type of research all too frequently is lacking in the area of human resource management and organizational behavior. This is one reason why research in human resources management gets less attention than the research in finance and marketing, which

frequently provide data that show how practices directly impact the financial performance of firms.

For the last thirty-five years of my career, I have had the good fortune to be part of two university-based research centers (ISR at the University of Michigan and CEO at the University of Southern California) that have focused on doing research that influences practice. Both have been successful because they operate very differently than academic departments. They are largely funded by grants from foundations, corporations and the federal government, so they have to pay attention to what the customer wants. They also reward publishing in non A-journals and give researchers the time to do field research. Overall, they have very different research environments than the ones that exist in most business schools and psychology departments.

At this point, it is important to note that the lack of academic research that is designed to guide practice has led to the proliferation of research studies by consulting firms and other for-profit enterprises. It is not surprising to me that Rynes, Giluk and Brown found that the most frequently cited articles in *HR Magazine* were done by consultants/consulting firms. Sensing a market for research that can guide practice, and recognizing that academics are not meeting the need, the leading consulting firms have created their own research departments and now regularly contribute research-based pieces to practitioner journals and newsletters. They also write books that are focused on what their research says the best practices are. The problem with their research and writing, of course, is that much of it is intended to promote the products of the consulting firms, rather than to demonstrate how research can positively impact practice.

## **Future Trends**

It is much easier to identify what needs to change in order for more EBM to be practiced than it is to make it happen. If I had to choose one change that would make a difference, it would be for business schools to change their research focuses. I would not argue that they should get out of the basic research business, but I would argue that they should do much more research and writing that focuses on practice. Business schools need to support and value (reward) research that informs practice and to support its being visible in publications that are read by practitioners. This position is highly consistent with their being professional schools that are focused on educating practitioners. Indeed, it is what medical schools currently do. I believe that more and more practitioners are ready for EBM because of their education, but it has to be accessible. The problem is that I do not see business schools showing any interest in changing their approach to research. If anything, they seem to be moving toward placing a greater emphasis on A-journal research.

Overall, there are many reasons for believing that the worlds of academic research and human resource management practice will remain very separate. Significant change would require a considerable move to the professionalization of the HR function and, as already noted, a major change in the type of research is valued by the major business schools. The former is perhaps more likely than the latter, but neither seems to be imminent or particularly likely. Thus we are likely to continue to see academic and practitioner publications being in very separate worlds and

to see organizations making decisions about what the best HR management practices are that are not research based.

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