

# “Nibbling at the Corners”<sup>1</sup> of the “Great Divide”<sup>2</sup> Between Academic Research and Professional Practice in HRM

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It seems to me that neither HR academics nor HR practitioners tend to pay much attention to what goes on in each other's world. On the one hand, research suggests that many HR professionals are unaware of, don't believe, or maybe just don't care about what HR researchers claim to have learned about how real-life staffing, compensation, performance management, and training programs could be made more effective. On the other hand, however, HR researchers have traditionally not taken great interest in looking at HR through practitioners' eyes and partnering with them to find better ways to deal with the day-to-day problems they face.

This is really unfortunate because together, HR academicians and practitioners could make our organizations healthier, both financially and as places to work.

The academic literature includes an enormous number of studies demonstrating, for example, what does and does not work well when it comes to interviewing, testing, and other components of personnel selection systems. The same can be said about compensation, performance evaluation, employee development, and any of the other aspects of the HR function. Additionally, considerable academic work has been done to develop ways to measure the financial impact that a variety of HR interventions can have on the organizations that use them. These include the specific impacts of personnel selection and T&D programs, as well as high-performance work systems more generally. Beyond that, progress in HR analytics (see Edwards and Edwards, 2019; Marr, 2018; Waters, Streets, McFarlane, and Johnson-Murray, 2018;) has begun to show how “big data” can be used to improve our HR systems even more.

Unfortunately, however, other research has shown that many HR professionals are either not aware of, or perhaps simply disagree with, some of those research findings. Sara Rynes and her colleagues<sup>3</sup> at the University of Iowa surveyed 959 HR professionals about their beliefs concerning the effectiveness of certain hiring, performance appraisal, motivation, and pay techniques. They found that many of the HR professionals' beliefs differed from what has been found in research. Attention must be given to gaining a better understanding of why this gap exists.

Looking at the problem from the other end, HR researchers have not been as attentive as they could be to the sorts of questions HR practitioners want to have answered. Although this may be changing a bit, perhaps due to the increased emphasis on impact as one of the criteria for prestigious accreditation by The Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB), I would argue that it is not as commonplace as it could and should be. Tenure and

promotion criteria in higher education have generally not rewarded faculty members for research on the sorts of problems that are most important to HR professionals.

Debra Cohen, former Senior Vice President of the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM), has written that the lack of attention paid by academia does not seem problematic to practitioners in general. She argues that practitioners are most interested in the views of people they feel are capable of helping them with what they care most about, and that this more often means authors, successful executives, and fellow managers rather than academics. In most cases, HR professionals are dealing with problems that require quick action. Unfortunately, academic research is usually a long process that can easily take a couple of years for peer-reviews, publication lags, and so on.

Cohen also argues that many academics take the wrong approach when dealing with HR professionals.

*At times, it has felt like some academicians are saying, “Pay attention to what I do because I know what is important,” rather than asking, “How can I use my significant (academic) talents to help HR practitioners and managers?” By the same token, practitioners read what they consider to be “research” without always understanding that it may not be scientific and may therefore not be solid evidence upon which to base important decisions. There is a fundamental difference between how academics approach the analysis of a problem and how practitioners focus on a problem. We need to change this difference and make a concentrated effort to close the gap if EBM [evidence-based management] is to be taken seriously, let alone take root in the practitioner community. (2007, p. 1017)*

Cohen described the state of affairs in 2007, and I would argue is still mostly the case, as “nibbling at the corners of the problem.” She recommends, among other things, that (a) academicians join and participate actively in practitioner organizations, (b) practitioners take advantage of opportunities to interact with the academic community, (c) scholars discuss their research with practitioners before and after it is conducted, to maximize transfer, and (d) practitioners and academicians alike commit to thinking outside the normal boundaries of their areas.

One way to do that would be for HR professionals to read Gary Latham’s book, *Becoming the Evidence-Based Manager: Making the Science of Management Work for You*. In it, Latham argues that most of what is generally available to practicing managers in books, conferences, workshops, etc., is more about the art than the science of management – but that it is the science that is more readily learned and transferred one’s own work situation. He goes to great lengths to present in plain language what research has clearly shown to be true about how to hire good employees, and then develop, motivate, and train those employees.

On the other side, in order for HR academics to be relevant in the future we must do a much better job than we have in the past of engaging with the world of practice and placing value on what they need to succeed.

I often end a semester of a college HR class with a couple of quotes. The first is from Frank Schmidt and Jack Hunter who once wrote about personnel selection procedures:

*Perhaps [our] greatest technological achievement ... over the past 100 years is the development of decision aids (e.g., paper-and-pencil tests, structured interviews, mechanical combination of predictors) that substantially reduce error in the prediction of employee performance (Schmidt & Hunter, 1998).*

The second is from Scott Highhouse:

*Arguably, the greatest failure has been the inability to convince employers to use them (Highhouse, 2008).*

I hope somebody will read these words 20 years from now and think this whole article is an odd relic from the past.

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## Endnotes

1. From Cohen (2007)
2. From Rynes (2007)

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