The Path Forward to Meaningful Evidence

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As the term “evidence based” becomes further integrated into scientific dogma, it is critical to consider how the concept of evidence should be adapted to best serve each field to which it is being applied. As Briner and Rousseau (2011) assert, the field of industrial–organizational (I–O) psychology needs techniques for bridging the researcher–practitioner gap and gathering the kind of evidence that is useful for organizations. Our perspective on this issue is that of external consultants designing, deploying, and researching a range of HR initiatives in medium to large corporations. We are most often in the position of responding to requests for evidence attesting to the value of our own solutions and working with organizations to produce evidence demonstrating the effectiveness of those solutions after they have been implemented. In general, we agree that I–O psychology might not have reached the ideal stage where substantial specific, credible, and accessible evidence exists for every implementation, but our perspective leads us to differ from Briner and Rousseau in terms of the demand for evidence and the type of evidence we feel is most likely to propel our field forward.

Briner and Rousseau allege a number of barriers to evidence-based I–O psychology—for several of these, such as the characterization of I–O psychologists as insufficiently skeptical and master’s-level programs being largely inadequate, we hold opposing opinions—but our biggest objection is to the notion that little or no client demand exists to encourage and support evidence-based approaches. Essentially, there are proprietary reasons why cross-organizational systematic reviews are inaccessible. But our experience has been that client demand for evidence about HR initiatives is actually very strong and salient today, it is just very specific. We see HR departments being held to a higher standard of being cost conscious yet still ensuring that their programs are adding value to organizational strategy. Thus, stakeholders want to know and are directly asking: How do I know this program worked for me? How can I prove this program made an impact?

So as organizations become more focused on being “evidence based” (e.g., Huselid, 1995; Pfeffer, 1997), the nature of the evidence most needed appears to be different from that of the systematic reviews that Briner and Rousseau recommend.

Systematic Reviews: Half of the Story

In our experience, there are generally two types of evidence gathering conducted by organizations. The first is broad and oriented toward past research to determine based on a previously established category of solutions, which is the “best” for meeting the organization’s specific needs.
This type of evidence is collected prior to executing an initiative and is covered in Briner and Rousseau’s Table 1 (e.g., practitioner expertise, local context, research evidence, and stakeholder perspectives). We agree that systematic reviews of past research are important as proof-of-concept evidence. Organizations face a challenge here because detailed information about specific HRM offerings is often not publicly available to guide their decision making (likely due to proprietary constraints mentioned earlier). But more importantly, this evidence is insufficient because decision makers are not just looking backward for general evidence but are focused on the future with a need to know if and how an intervention practically worked within their own organizations.

This leads us to the second form of evidence gathering that is more specific and future oriented, that is, to investigate and produce interpretable information about the observed impact of the specific solution on the problem it was originally chosen to address. In other words, what actually happened after implementing the solution? We have observed strong and increasing interest in this second form of evidence gathering, which systematic reviews do not address. The problem seems to be a level of specificity issue wherein decision makers may be well aware of published research reviews on a topic but view these reviews as insufficiently focused and inapplicable to their specific intervention and organization. Thus, practitioners and decision makers are forced to attempt conducting their own process to gather and compile real-time results of their specific solutions. And they struggle with how to do this efficiently and effectively. Furthermore, this type of analysis, if done at all by other organizations, is inaccessible to others because it is rarely if ever submitted back to the public domain through journal articles.

We view this need for more specific evidence gathering as an important target for evidence-oriented researchers and practitioners. To contribute to a more evidence-based field, researchers and practitioners should not only review previous research but also promote and guide organizationally specific evidence gathering now and in the future. We advocate an increased use of strategic case study approaches to blend science-based insights with practical implementation. We feel that creating evidence with both top-down (from systematic reviews) and bottom-up (from case studies) approaches will increase the likelihood that evidence-based practices are useful and valuable.

**The Path Forward**

Unlike the authors’ contention that the primary barrier to collecting this evidence is a lack of client interest, a more likely barrier for many organizations is a lack of knowledge about how to collect organizationally specific evidence strategically and credibly. Strategic evidence gathering is an important issue because many organizations currently only gather evidence about their processes rather than their results. For example, the majority of organizations measure reactions to their development programs but few measure visible behavior change after the program has been implemented. Although it is useful to determine if programs are being well received, it still leaves unresolved the question of whether the program achieved its intended effect(s).

Credibility is a second critical issue because of situations where evidence is gathered related to organizational strategy, but causation is incorrectly assumed from correlational data. For example, if a recent talent management initiative was correlated with organizational turnover, resulting reductions in turnover may be attributed to current economic conditions rather than to the initiative itself. Exploratory, bivariate analyses, as pervasive as they are in organizational research, are insufficient for providing an explanation (much less allowing for reasonable statements of causation) for how an HR initiative affected an organization. This explanation, or logic, is the key to creating value around an evidence-based approach and transforming data from mere
speculation into solid evidence. Without the logic of how relationships occur, organizations will be discouraged from investing the resources and energy required to gather the data they truly need.

Many have offered taxonomies to structure the process of collecting the evidence that will be most meaningful for organizations. For example, Boudreau and Ramstad (2006) offer a framework for measurement, dividing evidence into “efficiency,” “effectiveness,” and “impact” measures. Efficiency measures refer to process measures or data that demonstrate functionality. Effectiveness measures refer to advancements in human capital (e.g., attitudes, behaviors, and performance). Impact measures refer to data that correspond to organizational strategy. Using distinct areas such as these is valuable for identifying target metrics; however, collecting data in disjunct areas still leaves the story untold. For organizations to fully appreciate the value in evidence-based I–O psychology, they will need to be able to understand not only what their programs have achieved but also how they achieved it.

There is a body of research that exists around program evaluation that captures this idea of strategically measuring the impact of initiatives (i.e., Edwards, Scott, & Raju, 2007), but research around logic modeling takes program evaluation a step further and works on linking the metrics in a rational way (Davidson, 2010). By taking the taxonomy further and systematically defining, step by step, how an initiative can be expected to lead to the desired organizational objectives, the value of an evidence-based approach exponentially increases as does the likelihood of organizations actually gathering this evidence. Although we disagree on the type of evidence most needed, Briner and Rousseau advocated for new strategies to gather evidence, and we propose a logical path approach to do this. The logical path approach, as further described in Howard and Thomas (2010), facilitates explicit consideration of the chain of events that need to occur if an initiative is to have an impact on the organization’s business.

A logical path, as shown in Figure 1, starts with data documenting a program’s objectives and then captures the implementation and execution of the program. If a program is effectively executed, it should lead to changes in the organization’s talent (their behavior, attitudes, motivation, and performance). In turn, aggregated performance improvements among the organization’s talent should lead to improved business results. A logical path ensures each step is reasonable (not leaving gaps in rationale), strategic (aligned to the objectives of the program), and accountable (identifiable metrics). The result is a prescriptive approach for collecting evidence that will provide a credible explanation for the impact a program or initiative had on an organization.

Without strategic and credible measurement strategies that achieve buy-in from decision makers, organizations will continue to struggle with demonstrating evidence for their initiatives. A logical path approach provides a structured technique for promoting evidence gathering that also propels our field forward by focusing on real-world applications. Ensuring that our implementations are grounded in theory and evidence is of critical importance;
however, stopping there leaves our field stagnant in terms of becoming truly evidence based. Real value comes from seeing I–O psychology solutions making an impact not only in theory but also in practice.

References