

# Close the Gap Between Research and Practice

By Robert J. Grossman

There are many ways you can take advantage of academic HR research.

At the Society for Human Resource Management's (SHRM) 60th Annual Conference & Exposition in Chicago in June 2008, Herbert Heneman, professor emeritus of the University of Wisconsin's Management and Human Resources Department in Madison, received the prestigious \$50,000 Michael R. Losey Human Resource Research Award. Among other accomplishments, he was credited with helping prove that structured interviews of job applicants are vastly superior to informal ones.

Yet many academics say that HR practitioners either don't use structured interviews or, if they do, don't know the justification for using them. When it comes to research-based HR, that's just the tip of the iceberg. HR practitioners are not using the knowledge base created for their use, says Denise Rousseau, professor of organizational behavior at Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh. "Because of that, decision-making and practices that they support not only are less effective than they could be, they are potentially harmful." >

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*The author is a contributing editor of HR Magazine, a lawyer and a professor of management studies at Marist College in Poughkeepsie, N.Y.*

"There's an incontestable gap between what's happening in scholarly research and what's happening in the world of practitioners," adds Murray Dalziel, director of the University of Liverpool Management School. Dalziel admits that even he has sometimes been ignorant of relevant research findings while formerly a consultant.

"I advised a bank to change the structure of [its] credit committee because it was too big," he says. He later found that "the findings in decision-making suggest that they should have kept it at that size, even increased it. In another case, I counseled members of a high-level team to spend more time on building communication between team members." However, team-effectiveness research has established that for that kind of team—in which

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members didn't depend on each other to fulfill team goals—more communication harmed performance, an example where the common sense approach is contradicted by research.

Consider the survey of HR executives and managers conducted by management professor Sara Rynes and colleagues Amy Colbert and Kenneth Brown at the University of Iowa ("HR Professionals' Beliefs about Effective Human Resource Practices: Correspondence Between Research and Practice," *Human Resource Management*, Summer 2002).

Asked whether they agreed, disagreed or were uncertain about 35 proven management, staffing, compensation and other employment practices, more than half of the 959 respondents either did not believe the following findings to be true or were uncertain about them:

- Intelligence predicts job performance better than conscientiousness.
- Screening for intelligence results in higher job performance than screening for values or values fit.
- Being very intelligent is not a disadvantage for performing well in a "low-skilled" job.

- Personality inventories vary considerably in terms of how well they predict an applicant's job performance.
- Goal setting is more effective for improving performance than employee participation in decision-making.
- Pay is much more important to employees than what they imply in surveys.

### Different Worlds

There's consensus—among academics and research-savvy HR professionals—that HR managers who follow evidence-based principles are best positioned to optimize the success of their organizations. Still, most HR professionals have little time, interest or tolerance for the more than 15,000 business and management articles that pour out of 1,900 academic English-language journals each year. Why? Practitioners:

**Can't wait for answers.** Practitioners focus on solving problems and getting tasks done in time- and pressure-packed settings. Academics explore, contemplate and pursue research that can take three years or more before culminating in a journal article.

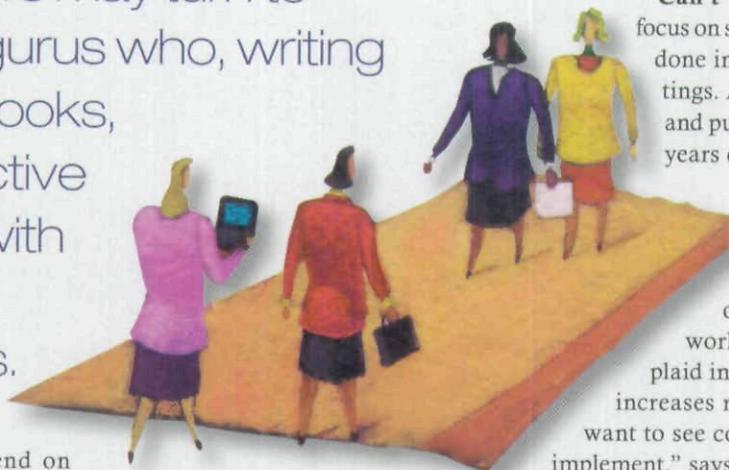
**Care less about science than outcome.** They don't care why processes, tests, or other instruments or procedures work, just that they do. If wearing plaid instead of polka dots on Tuesdays increases retention, they'll do it. "People want to see cost-benefit analyses before they implement," says professor Wayne Cascio of the University of Colorado Business School in Denver.

"It's not enough to know structured interviews will give you better-quality people. Practitioners want to see how it affects the bottom line."

**Hate ambiguity.** "For academics, the more you know, the more you realize you don't know," says Howard Klein, professor of management and human resources at Ohio State University in Columbus. "There's no definitive answer; instead, the best answer may be, 'It depends.'" Practitioners need concrete solutions; they're not happy with ambiguities. They may turn to business gurus who, writing in trendy books, offer attractive solutions with formulaic takeaways.

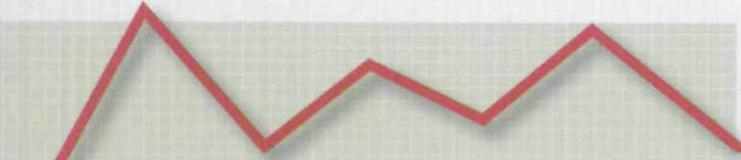
But this advice comes with drawbacks: "It's like consuming fast food," Dalziel says. "The more fast-food ideas we take in, the more likely our veins eventually will clog up. It's good to a degree, but too much can be deadly." In other words, such gurus often dumb down and oversimplify research to provide takeaways.

**Want relevant research.** Academics tend to be interested in different subjects than practitioners. For practitioners, those



subjects may be too theoretical or too esoteric, or may not be a need-to-know priority. But for academics, whose careers rise or fall on their success at achieving tenure and promotion, the topics are influenced by what the academic reward structure requires. There are 1,264 full-time faculty members in HR-related disciplines at four-year and graduate institutions, 522 in human resources—including personnel and industry-labor relations—and 742 in behavioral science and organizational behavior, according to the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB).

Fellow academics play a significant role in tenure and promotion processes and base recommendations to a great degree on the research that professors produce. The most highly regarded research is published in peer-reviewed journals. Edited by academics, submitted articles must survive a blind review where academics with expertise in the subject matter offer comments.



## Uncovering Research

The Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business segments research into three categories: “discipline-based,” which is theoretical research in its purest form that is unlikely to find its way into practice for some time; “applied” research, which serves practitioners; and “pedagogical” research, which is used to improve teaching.

Experts agree that applied research should meet three criteria. It should be:

- Rigorous—conducted scientifically so the results can be validated and replicated.
- Relevant—directed at learning more about, furthering or solving some HR-related problem.
- Readable—accessible to practitioners who stand to benefit.

Applied and pedagogical research, though valued in the rhetoric that most universities espouse, in practice take a back seat to discipline-based, theoretical research. This work is highly valued by editors of the top journals, and with tenure and promotion on their minds, academics strive to produce work that will land them in these journals.

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Since editors choose the subjects, faculty members study the journals and target their research to areas popular with them, improving the odds of publication. Peer review is self-perpetuating and limits the type of work. “If I don’t think it will be published, I won’t research it,” says Mary A. Gowan, professor of management at Elon University in Elon, N.C.

But what editors publish may not appeal to practitioners. When co-author Diana Deadrick, associate professor of management at Old Dominion University in Norfolk, Va., compared the content of HR-related academic journals with trade publications (“Revisiting the Research-Practice Gap in HR: A Longitudinal Analysis,” *Human Resource Management Review*, 2009), she found some overlap in articles, but also significant differences. For example, though practitioners demonstrate strong interest in compensation issues, compensation was not among the top eight topics of interest to academics.

“I’m not sure many of the research questions are what keep practitioners awake at night,” Dalziel says. “These articles tend to be strong on rigor, weak on relevance.”

**Want research they can understand.** Even when academics want their research to impact practice, too often their writing is unintelligible to the business community. “The work gets lost in translation,” Klein says.

“Academics speak primarily to academics; you find this in every discipline,” says Maureen Fleming, professor emeritus in the University of Montana’s School of Business Administration and past chair of the SHRM Foundation. “After an article appears in a journal, its value for tenure and promotion purposes has been established. There is no incentive for the author to rewrite it for practitioners or to publicize it further.”

Rynes cites Malcolm Gladwell, author of the best-seller *Outliers: The Story of Success* (Little, Brown, 2008), as a master of communicating research for the average reader. “More of us have to learn from authors like Gladwell. We have to come up with better stories, not be so risk-averse or qualify stuff so much.”

Academics have a wish list, too. Academics want practitioners to:

**Understand and value research.** Practitioners need to be discerning research customers, but most haven’t had training,

Klein says. Jeff McHenry, director of people and organizational capability for Microsoft in Redmond, Wash., says higher-level HR managers, especially in larger organizations, tend to be research-literate. In small and mid-size organizations, however, "prospects are grimmer."



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**Apply research principles.** Ticking off scientifically proven principles is easy—the hard part is using them, Rousseau says. "Practitioners have to learn to be discriminating, to be able to look back, see the source and differentiate between an opinion and evidence-based conclusion. They should master the 'how to' as well as the 'what.' Even if you know what the research says, you still have to know in what situation and with what timing you should use the evidence."

**Be flexible.** More open-mindedness to ideas and less defensiveness would be welcome, Rynes says. "If we think we have a good finding that people don't think they'll like, how can we get them to try it? It's the toughest nut to crack."

### Bridge the Gap

The debate is under way about how to close the gap between research and reality, academics and practitioners, evidence-based and seat-of-the-pants management. Here are a few suggestions that may stimulate discussion:

- Get serious about implementing academic accreditation standards. The AACSB requires member schools—461 in the United States—to establish a mission that includes production of intellectual contributions that advance the knowledge and practice of business and management. Each school is asked to define the intellectual contributions it deems appropriate to its mission. The definition might read: "The school will support management practice through the production of articles and tools for managers." Or, it might read: "The school will lead management through basic scholarly research that contributes original knowledge and theory in management disciplines." Or, "The faculty's scholarship will be a mix of management practice-related advances and pedagogical research," according to AACSB Accreditation Standard 2.

"What matters is that schools choose and actually do what they say," says Daniel LeClair, vice president and chief knowledge officer at AACSB in Tampa, Fla. That means if a school says its emphasis is applied research, faculty scholarly contributions should reflect that priority, in quantity, quality and commu-

nication to the population it is supposed to reach. Two hundred eighty-one AACSB-accredited schools have self-selected applied scholarship—contributions to practice—as their "high emphasis" priority. One hundred eighty-four more list it as a co-priority with either discipline-based or pedagogical scholarship.

In theory, therefore, the pipeline of relevant, readable applied research should flow freely. In practice, tenure and promotion decisions mainly continue to be driven by the number of theoretical or discipline-based articles a professor scores in top-tier journals. "We're trying to reverse the practice of just counting, and turn the emphasis to more on outcomes," LeClair says. In HR and organi-

zational behavior combined, Rousseau estimates there are 35 to 40 top-tier English-language journals; 12 focus on human resources.

Making quality count as much as quantity represents a major shift, which LeClair says will take time. "We're studying 10 schools to try to move in this direction. If we're only successful in making quality matter as much as quantity, we'll be headed in the right direction."

- Examine college curriculums. HR curriculums should develop the competency in all HR professionals to know what is and is not a scientifically based finding or conclusion. "How can we blame practitioners if we haven't taught them?" Rousseau asks. "We need to audit our curriculums to make sure students are being taught to appreciate the importance of evidence-based management and the role of research in advancing HR." That requires basic understanding of math and statistics.

Most undergraduate business and industrial psychology curriculums feature at least one course in statistics, and some observers say that should suffice. Whether the form and content of these courses is sufficient, or whether more in-depth study and practical applications should be added, are up for discussion.

In recent years, faculty members have been reluctant to add more quantitative requirements to HR curriculums for fear of losing students. "We did research on who chooses HR and found that a lot were math-phobic," Rynes says. The pressure on faculty to earn good student ratings of their teaching has an impact on what and how they teach, she says. For example, too often graduate students are not being asked to do research

### Online Resources

To discuss this issue online and for additional information about evidence-based human resource management, see the online version of this article at [www.shrm.org/hrmagazine](http://www.shrm.org/hrmagazine) for links to:

- The SHRM Foundation's Effective Practice Guidelines and other resources and research grants.
- The SHRM *Human Resource Curriculum Guidebook and Templates for Undergraduate and Graduate Programs*.
- The Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business.

or even read it. "MBA students don't like reading research, so instead students are just discussing cases and practicing being a leader."

- Recognize consultants as middlemen and researchers. Consultants generate useful, practical answers to pressing problems that practitioners grapple with. "They are better geared to do so than academics," Rynes says. "They are really interested in picking up the latest research and getting it out."

Consultants have better data than academics because they tap institutional databases. As with pharmaceutical company research, however, critics argue that self-interest taints consultants' findings. Also, most consultant-based research is privately owned and not widely available for study. "I can't pay \$600 to figure out if it's good," Rynes says.

Academics who moonlight as consultants are more likely to relate to the realities of the workplace. "In my own graduate training, if the professors hadn't dragged me along to help them with their consulting, I wouldn't have had the advantage of being able to relate to the practice side," Cascio says. "It influenced my whole career."

Cascio, John Boudreau, professor at the Marshall School of Business at the University of Southern California in Los Angeles, and Dave Ulrich, professor in the Ross School of Business at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, number among a growing cadre of academic consultants who, by virtue of presentation skills, personality and knowledge, thrive in both camps.

- Foster co-creation of ideas. Encourage faculty and practitioners to develop and partner in research. Establish conferences or think-tank sessions that bring them together. Encourage exchanges. Cross attendance does occur, but not in enough numbers to create a shared comfort zone, Rynes says. "Conferences are too much one side or the other. The Society for Industrial and Organizational Psychology has a good model that seems to be attracting a broad cross section."

- Open doors. Businesspeople should cooperate with researchers. "Just getting access has become more difficult," LeClair says. "They feel their only real competitive asset is their people and are worried about knowledge leakage, liability questions and survey fatigue."

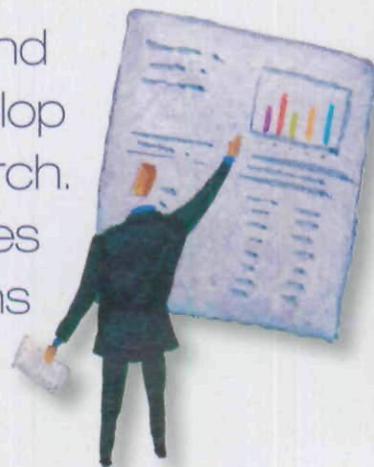
- Use Effective Practice Guidelines (EPGs). The SHRM Foundation has been addressing the "lost in translation" dilemma by hiring academics to rewrite academic research in a digestible form. EPGs—on topics from retaining talent to total rewards—can be downloaded from the SHRM web site.

"They're the best example of a bridge between practitioners and evidence-based practices," says Larry Fogli, president and CEO of People Focus in Pleasant Hill, Calif. But "practitioners

still don't know they exist and don't know how to apply them. ... Someone told me, 'I've read them, don't understand them and to me they look too theoretical.'" [Editor's note: Fogli, Gowan and Rousseau are on the board of directors of the SHRM Foundation.] The SHRM Foundation also produces DVDs that demonstrate research applied in business settings.

- Create an encyclopedia of HR precepts. Assemble a "bible" of about 130 HR principles you should know, Rousseau says. She

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cites medicine as a discipline whose practitioners do this effectively. "Twenty years ago, they talked about a research gap; practitioners were not reading medical journals and had significantly different views about treatments depending on where they practiced. For example, we now know the value of carrying an aspirin in your wallet in the event of a cardiac event, but we've actually known about it for 20 years. What has helped doctors catch up to this and other scientifically supported findings is the recognition that they had not been following the evidence. They've created medical summaries available to everyone. Then came the Internet, making the whole body of knowledge open."

- Support sponsored research. Invest in academics doing research that practitioners need. The SHRM Foundation is looking to fund research that has clear, practical implications. "Our criteria are grounded in relevance and rigor," says Klein, chair of the SHRM Foundation Board of Directors' Research Committee. "We ask applicants to make the case why their proposal matters from an academic and practice perspective." Last year, the SHRM Foundation gave grants totaling about \$750,000. "We get about 50 to 60 applications and award grants that average \$65,000."

- Call your local professor. "Ask questions," LeClair says. "Six out of 10 will be delighted to speak with you."

- Party, party, party. In every boundary where knowledge doesn't transfer, social relationships are lacking. Until academics and practitioners have more of a social life together, Rynes says, it will be hard to close the gap. ■