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Evidence-based human resource management practices in three EU developing member states: Can managers tell truth from fallacy?

Frank Bezzina^{a,*}, Vincent Cassar^a, Katarzyna Tracz-Krupa^b, Sylwia Przytuła^b, Darko Tipurić^c

^a Department of Management, Faculty of Economics, Management and Accountancy, University of Malta, Msida, MSD2080, Malta

^b Department of Human Resource Management, Wroclaw University of Economics, ul. Komandorska 118-120, 53-345, Wroclaw, Poland

^c Department of Organisation and Management, Faculty of Economics and Business, University of Zagreb, J.F. Kennedy Square 6, 10000, Zagreb, Croatia

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ABSTRACT

Good management practice is assumed to be the product of a good knowledge base and its application, not least in Human Resource Management (HRM). The aim of this study is to assess the extent to which managers adhere to practices of HRM that are more likely to be upheld by research evidence as opposed to beliefs for which research evidence is highly lacking. In addition, it evaluates practitioners' explanations about adopting HR practices. This study was conducted in three European Union (EU) developing countries (Poland, Croatia and Malta). A mixed-methods approach is adopted, utilising a web-based questionnaire targeting a purposive sample of 300 practitioners occupying managerial positions and directly involved in people management (Study 1), followed by 20 in-depth interviews with similar participants (Study 2). Our study reveals that managers are always fully cognisant of the main body of research evidence related to specific HR practices. Practitioners are more likely to access required knowledge for applications through popular sources rather than more reliable ones due to time constraints, inaccessibility and inability to evaluate evidence. While they appreciate the role of theory, the leap from theory to application is not easy or straightforward, commenting that large gaps between research and practice prevail. These overall trends may imply that practitioners base their decisions on personal experience rather than on evidence-based knowledge or expertise acquired through evidence-grounded applications. Results suggest that future research should focus on closing the gap by evaluating how academics impart the knowledge and how practitioners apply that knowledge.

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1. Introduction

Management is one of mankind's oldest practices in organised social units. Drucker (1998) has forcefully stated that management has often become the mere substitution of thought of knowledge for folklore and superstition. A cursory review of some 'best management sellers' and 'guru tips' casts doubts on the values attributed to real scientific foundations of management and the extent to which researched lines of thought make any sense for managers in today's complex realities of organisational life (Rousseau, 2012).

The main aim of this study is to evaluate practitioners'

knowledge about the evidence or otherwise associated to a number of human resource management (HRM) practices. In addition, the study seeks to evaluate practitioners' views about the role of theory, research, and practice and the gaps between them with implications for improved applications. This study is inspired by previous studies exploring the same issues, three of which are notable. The first study by Rynes, Brown, and Colbert (2002) distinctively revealed that HR managers from the US and other settings do have a number of irregular beliefs about specific researched HR topics and will rely on what they guess should work best. The authors concluded that one of the main reasons for the propagation of irregular beliefs is attributable to the lack of knowledge held by practitioners. The second study by Sanders, van Riemsdijk, and Groen (2008) assessed the gap between research and practice amongst Dutch participants. Their results replicate more or less previous findings (e.g. Rynes et al., 2002) and suggest that there are large discrepancies between what the evidence states

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: frank.bezzina@um.edu.mt (F. Bezzina), vincent.cassar@um.edu.mt (V. Cassar), katarzyna.tracz@ue.wroc.pl (K. Tracz-Krupa), s_przytuła@wp.pl (S. Przytuła), dtipuric@efzg.hr (D. Tipurić).

and practitioners' believe, especially in areas related to recruitment and selection. The third study assesses the motives underlying managers' apparent 'ignorance'. [Barends, Villeneuve, Briner, and ten Have \(2015\)](#) surveyed more than 1500 management practitioners in Belgium, the Netherlands and the US. In general, their findings reveal that time to consult the evidence is a main barrier for translating research into practice, and this is mostly attributed to the lack of readability provided by academic materials and journals.

These studies share certain commonalities in terms of the economic settings in which they have been conducted. In general, these countries have well-developed research foundations in the field of management through high funding initiatives and a refined knowledge base that is often applicable to their cultural business context coupled with a developed management education system. However, these findings are not necessarily transferable to other business contexts in Europe. Therefore, our study surveys management practitioners from three relatively new and developing European Union (EU) member states, namely Poland, Croatia and Malta. All three countries have a market that by and large is highly dependent on the state, and competition does not take shape as in other more economically advanced countries like Nordic countries, Germany or the UK; this is in particular because of either the size or historical past of the countries, which is not always easily washed away by simply introducing new policies and legislation. On the other hand, all three countries are beginning to consider their economic competitiveness from an increasing emphasis on their human capital. Contemporary debate centres around the role of HRM in feeding a company's strategy to enhance competitiveness (cf. [Jackson, Schuler, & Kaifeng, 2014](#)). Therefore, while they may not have the research base as developed as in other countries and often require borrowing from other research conducted in different cultural contexts, they still have to face issues similar to other more developed EU member states. Hence, it is warranted to conduct this investigation in other less researched European contexts and evaluate whether the situation is comparable or different from studies conducted in more established economies.

2. Review of the literature

2.1. Evidence-based management

2.1.1. An overview

The general trend accepted by most scholars is that management should be both an art and a science ([Boettinger, 1975](#); [Freedman, 1992](#)). This entails acknowledging the management to be a body of knowledge that should be imparted to practitioners to enable them to work in a versatile manner. This approach secures a tight link between theory and practice. Refusing the knowledge component and abiding to unfounded intuitions render the management neither a science nor an art. In the early 20th century, Alfred Sloan advocated the need for a more scientific approach for management. However, management evolution often meant that the artistic portion often manifests itself as managers opting for choices as they feel best and adopting 'quick fixes', thereby relegating the management discipline to a mere 'management experience' at the expense of management's reliance on more scientifically driven evidence.

In the last 10 years or so, the need to beef up decisions in management with evidence has begun to be felt. As [Rynes et al. \(2002\)](#) found, those organisations whose HR practitioners rely more on the available scientific evidence were more likely to be successful in their jobs and this reflected on their company's performance. A meta-analysis by [Crook, Todd, Combs, Woehr, and Ketchen \(2011\)](#) found that human capital relates strongly to

performance, especially when the human capital in question is not readily tradeable in labour markets. A number of scholars have taken on the challenge and started to re-route the general domain of management within a more so-called evidence-based approach. The term is relatively new to management but not so to other fields, especially medicine ([Sackett, Richardson, Rosenberg, & Haynes, 1997](#); [Sackett, Rosenberg, Gray, Haynes, & Richardson, 1996](#)). Evidence-based approaches followed suit in other fields such as policy development, environmental studies and industrial chemistry. However, in management education, the 'revolution' of how and why managers adopt specific practices as opposed to others remains mostly an art in the rawest form and subject to irregular beliefs, cognitive biases and personal preferences for methods that seem to work only in the eyes of the beholder. A number of authors have addressed this issue in a number of publications in an attempt to separate the seed from the chafe: research-based principles from mere fads and fallacies (e.g. [Latham, 2009](#); [Moss & Francis, 2007](#); [Pearce, 2009](#); [Pfeffer & Sutton, 2006a](#)). This lack of evidence-based decision-making has motivated [Pfeffer and Sutton \(2006b\)](#) to comment that 'managers are actually more ignorant than doctors about which prescriptions are reliable – and they're less eager to find out' (p. 2).

Some management thinkers have long expressed a need to steer management practice back to its scientific roots by looking at the world in a more systematic fashion. [Rousseau \(2006\)](#) defines evidence-based management (EBM) as a systematic, evidence-informed practice of management that incorporates scientific knowledge in the content and process of making decisions. This shift leaves room for one's creative expression but acknowledges that evidence is grounded in facts. While some criticisms have emerged towards EBM (e.g. [Denzin, 2009](#); [Hodgkinson, 2012](#); [Learnmonth, 2006, 2008](#); [Morrell, 2008](#)), the field has continued to grow and attract interest amongst scholars as a legitimate attempt to bridge the gap between practitioners and management researchers (e.g. [Barends, 2015](#); [Locke, 2009](#); [Rousseau, 2012](#)).

2.1.2. Decision-making at the core of EBM

Decision-making is at the heart of management practice. Decisions cost money, time and resources and are an important foundation for managers' learning. We live in a business environment where the market topography is a complex one, filled with challenges and with an increasing need to undo failed business models and developing new organisational capacities to forecast and manage risk in the process of adaptation ([Rousseau & Barends, 2011](#)). [Baba and HakemZadeh \(2012\)](#) argue that the strength of evidence is a function of its rigor and relevance that in turn is manifested by its fit to the context, the quality of the findings and the replicability of the evidence. In their words, 'EBM is a way to regulate methods of gathering and assessing management and business knowledge to produce better standards and guidelines' (p. 837). Also, [Rousseau and McCarthy \(2007\)](#) state that 'EBM means managerial decisions and organisational practices informed by the best available scientific evidence' (p. 84).

Unfortunately, turning data into information and knowledge that is applicable is often not direct or straightforward. While these are interlinked processes, they exist in a cyclical fashion. This transformation is one based on logic that is both developmental and sequential and contains a degree of selective attention to the most appropriate and valid data that can elicit applicable results ([Bennett & Bennett, 2000](#)). This is because, in essence, not all the information gathered can be justified with a favourable level of good evidence. More so, translating the information (evidence) into practice requires closing the gap between what is known and what is practised ([Law & MacDermid, 2008](#); [Weaver, Warren, & Delaney, 2005](#)).

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