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Don't know, don't care: An exploration of evidence based knowledge and practice in human resource management

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A B S T R A C T

Over the past two decades the integrity (alignment of words and deeds) of the Human Resource Management (HRM) profession has been questioned by scholars who have identified a gap between the rhetoric of 'people are our most important asset' and the reality of 'impersonal economic rationalism'. In a more recent, and as yet unconnected, stream of research there has been concern about a research-practice gap in HRM. This article draws on both streams of research to explain why HRM Does not implement evidence based practice. It focuses on research indicating that HRM practitioners are not incentivized to learn about evidence based practice and develops theory proposing that their satisfaction with the status quo reflects a value proposition based on utilitarian instrumentalism. Further to this, it is proposed that management's focus on the short-term drives and obfuscates current approaches. It concludes that neither academia nor HRM practitioners are incentivized to change current practice with negative consequences for employees, organizations, and HRM practitioners. Arguments are supported and illustrated with High Performance Work Practices and solutions are proposed to implement evidence based practice.

1. Introduction

The research-practice gap in HRM has received recent attention (Briner & Rousseau, 2011; Kaufman, 2012; Rynes, 2012; Rynes, Colbert, & Brown, 2002; Rynes, Giluk, & Brown, 2007) and the cost of this gap regarding competitive advantage through human capital has been proposed (Terpstra & Limpaphayom, 2012). A number of studies have shown that, despite availability of theoretical and empirical advice, many organizations failed to take up effective approaches to HRM (Becker & Gerhart, 1996; de Gama, McKenna, & Peticca-Harris, 2012; Kane, Crawford, & Grant, 1999). There are also questions about whether HRM as a function charged with designing and implementing formal systems for managing people has had a positive impact in its 25 to 30 years of existence (Delbridge & Keenoy, 2010; Kaufman, 2012) coupled with evidence that there is little change in HRM over two decades (Lawler & Boudreau, 2012).

It is proposed that the current divide between research and practice in HRM is problematic for organizations that fail to achieve competitive advantage through people (Gill & Meyer, 2011; Huselid, 1995; Pfeffer & Veiga, 1999); for employees who are treated as 'resources' or inputs rather than 'humans' (de Gama et al., 2012; Legge, 1995); and for HRM professionals who fail to develop competencies that could enhance their organizational status (Ulrich, Brockbank, Johnson, & Younger, 2007).

HRM's inability to implement evidence based management has been attributed to the divide between academics and practitioners in terms of *lack of awareness* of what the other side knows and cares about; *lack of belief* or confidence in the knowledge generated or held by the other side; and *lack of implementation* of knowledge or ideas, even in the face of awareness and belief (Lawler, 2007;

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Rynes, 2012; Rynes et al., 2007). Recent evidence confirms a knowing and belief gap in that practitioners do not have knowledge of evidence based management and do not seek or value this knowledge (Rynes et al., 2002; Rynes et al., 2007). There is also some evidence on a knowing-doing gap in that HRM practitioners implement practices they know are not optimum for employees (de Gama et al., 2012). To date the connection between these three antecedents has not been clearly made e.g., how lack of ability to implement may influence lack of knowledge and belief.

Most attention regarding HRM's failure to implement evidence based management has thus far focused on knowledge transfer from academics to HRM practitioners. In particular, there may be a substantial divide between academics and practitioners (Kieser & Leiner, 2009; Lawler, 2007; Rynes et al., 2002; Rynes et al., 2007) which reduces the transfer of research knowledge. Further, academics may not be incentivized to bridge the research-practice gap (e.g., Bartunek & Rynes, 2014). Theory has been developed on why academics may not transfer knowledge to practitioners but little attention has been given to investigating why practitioners may not seek evidence based knowledge. Further, there is an assumption that closing the knowledge gap will translate into implementation of evidence based management with certification of HRM practitioners being a recent focus of academia (see fall 2015 issue of People & Strategy and 2012 issue of Human Resource Management Review devoted to HR certification) and professional bodies (Society of Human Resource Management, 2016) as a vehicle to achieve this. However, whilst good management depends on the implementation of practices based on research evidence, managers may not make rational choices and instead implement decisions based on dogma and belief, and even self-interest (Pfeffer & Sutton, 2006). Consequently, this article moves beyond the divide between academics and practitioners to consider the organizational context (Pfeffer & Cohen, 1984) – namely the HRM function's power relationship with management (Ferris & King, 1991) – that influences HRM's intentions to implement evidence based management. The focus is placed on HRM practitioners' motivation to seek and use evidence based knowledge in a context that (i) is not supportive of evidence based management and (ii) affords HRM practitioners' limited power to effect change. More specifically, this article contributes to understanding on why HRM does not implement evidence based management or value evidence based knowledge. This article will make three contributions. First, it reviews and consolidates what is known about the causes of the research-practice gap which is currently deemed to be a key antecedent of HRM's failure to implement evidence based management. Second, it sheds light on reasons why HRM practitioners may favour the status quo rather than seek and implement evidence based knowledge. Third, recommendations are developed for academics and practitioners to embed evidence based management in organizations that move beyond existing solutions focussing on HRM competency and certification. The proposed model that is presented in this article is outlined in Fig. 1 below.

2. Causes of low evidence based management in HRM: a review of extant literature

To date most attention on evidence based management in HRM has been focused on HRM practitioners' lack of knowledge. It has been proposed that practitioners operate in a vacuum of knowledge (Taylor, Keelty, & McDonnell, 2002) with Rynes et al.'s (2002) research finding that practitioners' knowledge did not align with research evidence. She and her colleagues cite an 'unimpressive' average level of knowledge, high variability in knowledge, and poor alignment between academic and practitioner beliefs. This was a 'best case' scenario given they sampled the highest-level HRM practitioners and those with less knowledge were more likely to be non-respondents. Specifically, Rynes et al.'s (2002) research found that HR managers typically do not know the evidence with less than 1% of HR managers reading the academic literature regularly (Rynes et al., 2002).

To date the reasons for the knowledge gap in HRM have focused on the failure of academics to consider translation of their findings for practitioners or to communicate in a way that practitioners can understand. It has been proposed that HRM practitioners do not have access to academic knowledge because HRM roles may be filled by managers without HRM expertise who are 'passing

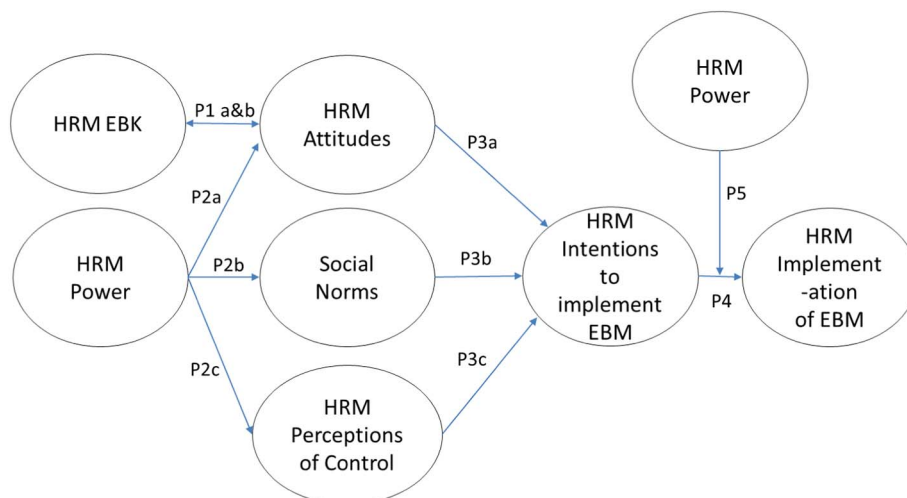


Fig. 1. Power and HRM practitioner intentions to implement evidence based management.

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