

Evidence-based HR: From Fads to Facts?

“The jury is out whether EBHR will take off. It could go either way. We now need a period of co-creation in the idea. Although academics have coined the phrase, practitioners will need to make it their own before they commit much effort to thinking or behaving differently.”

Wendy Hirsh, Report Author.

Executive Summary

“So will EBHR take off? The jury is still out, but the opportunity is also great. Progress seems to depend on whether academics will meet practitioners more than half-way in disseminating relevant research - and on the desire of HR professionals themselves to take hold of the idea.” **Wendy Hirsh.**

- 1 The idea of evidence-based HR (EBHR) has emerged in business schools, originally in the US, over the past few years. It has been strongly influenced by evidence-based approaches to other disciplines - especially medicine - and is a direct development from the emerging concept of evidence-based management.
- 2 EBHR advocates practitioners using the best available ‘scientific’ research on HR, and combining this with information from inside the organisation and their own experience and judgement. The context of the organisation and its HR stakeholders also explicitly connects to taking an evidence-based approach.
- 3 In effect, EBHR is an approach to decision-making in which the application of logic, systematic search for the best available evidence, and critical appraisal of that evidence, feed into decision-making and action, followed by monitoring and evaluation. It can be seen as an attempt to curb HR’s weakness for fads and fashions and somewhat simplistic and ill-founded notions of ‘best practice’.
- 4 This study’s HR practitioners did not see ‘evidence’ primarily in terms of external ‘scientific’ research - but were more focused on improving their use of internal information sources, plus a degree of external networking and benchmarking. Ideas about EBHR could be used to help practitioners ask more challenging questions when looking at new ideas or other organisations’ practices. Benchmarking on metrics has been overplayed and, at best, provides a prompt to investigate any surprising trends.
- 5 The idea of ‘scientific’ evidence in HR is somewhat problematic. Academics have varied views on the extent to which we have - or even could have - proven ‘facts’, which can be generalised across organisational contexts. Good quality, systematic reviews are lacking, which would present a balanced picture of evidence from multiple studies on a subject or practice, in language practitioners could understand.
- 6 There is an interesting evolution in the way some organisations are using internal data - moving from an ad hoc set of HR and workforce metrics to more refined and business-aligned scorecards or sets of human capital measures. They have then added different kinds of data - especially employee attitudes, financial and business measures - and started to examine the links between employee experience, customer or operational measures, and bottom line outcomes.

The current trend for engagement surveys and employee-profit value chain analysis are examples of this approach. This may progress to using varied sources of data to understand the multiple levers which connect how we employ and manage people with business results.
- 7 Practitioners quite naturally understand the relevance of using data in the diagnosis of issues and evaluation of interventions or practices. There is a natural evidence cycle in organisations of diagnosis-action-evaluation. Showing where and how external research evidence can feed into this cycle may help practitioners adopt a more evidence-based approach.

**“Instead of being interested in what is new, we ought to be interested in what is true.”
Pfeffer and Sutton, 2006a.**

8 For our HR practitioners, the business context is central. They want to be 'business-minded' in aligning HR solutions with business priorities and to use evidence, where possible, in the same 'business-like' way as other functions. They also recognise the need to challenge the assumptions and personal preferences of managers – and work with the unavoidable ambiguity of the role of HR in organisations. Where the HR function is engaging with the wider agenda of organisation effectiveness, it can facilitate an evidence-based management approach - of which people management is an integral part.

9 Both academics and practitioners are interested in the idea of 'reflective professional practice' which sits at the heart of EBHR. It includes

- stronger professional knowledge and more explicit understanding of how theory relates to practice
- using personal experience and judgement
- challenging beliefs of oneself and others
- bringing this wider set of evidence, and self-awareness, to a more systematic approach to HR decisions.

10 Developing better, shared frameworks for taking HR decisions, asking useful questions and pulling in evidence of various kinds, seems likely to be a particularly helpful way of developing EBHR in practice.

11 This study identifies six main action areas for organisations to strengthen their capability to adopt an EBHR approach.

- Improving internal data and systems.
- Developing an EBHR mindset, skills and frameworks in HR.
- Accessing external evidence more effectively.
- Improving the external evidence base and its value to practitioners.
- Building partnerships and alliances with those who can support EBHR.
- Strengthening demand for EBHR from both HR and business leaders.

12 So will EBHR take off and make a real difference? The jury is still out. One risk is that it will look like academics telling practitioners that they should spend more time reading journal articles. Another is that few organisations will invest enough in their data systems or analytical capability to support practitioners in understanding how people management really affects business.

But the opportunity is also great. Progress seems to depend on whether academics will meet practitioners more than half-way in disseminating relevant research - and on the desire of HR professionals themselves to take hold of the idea and make it their next step in their growing professionalism.

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