



STRONG FOUNDATIONS: EVIDENCE-BASED HR

On 18th May 2023, CRF members gathered in-person to explore the topic of evidence-based HR (EBHR). This session focused on defining evidence-based practice and EBHR, summarising HR’s progress in becoming more evidence based, and ways HR can strengthen its evidence-based practice. The day also included three case study sessions, focusing on how three different HR functions had implemented their own evidence-based practices, and what we can learn from these. These Post Meeting Notes summarise the discussions.

KEY TAKEAWAYS



1.

Evidence-based practice evolved to help practitioners make better-informed decisions in identifying problems and choosing the interventions that are most likely to help.



2.

Evidence-based practice should incorporate multiple sources of evidence, adopt a structured approach to evidence and focus on the most trustworthy and relevant evidence.

Sources of evidence particularly relevant to HR include stakeholders’ views, practitioners’ expertise, evidence from within the organisation and scientific evidence.

3.



4.

HR as a function now has access to more data than ever and is using it more, but this is not necessarily leading to greater insight and to making better-informed decisions. Many actions taken by HR are still based on no evidence or data at all.

EBHR is political and therefore stakeholders should be included in the dialogue about evidence.

5.



6.

Context is imperative for EBHR. Evidence from benchmarking needs to be treated cautiously – just because it’s used elsewhere doesn’t mean it will work at your organisation and popular activities may be fads.



7.

HR analytics can help us to become more strategic, decisive and informed. However, advanced analytics are not always required and expert opinion is usually preferable to novice analysis.

Barriers to EBHR include the subjective nature of the employee experience, difficulty in accessing relevant evidence, internal power dynamics and a historic lack of analytical skills amongst HR professionals.

8.



Quick wins to improve your EBHR approach include sense checking your arguments, using existing data better, benchmarking what works, focusing on implementation (not just design) and evaluating to improve.

9.



10.

Ways to build longer-term EBHR capability include collaborating with other areas of the business, improving internal data systems, reaching out for trustworthy external data and strengthening HR’s evidence-based skills.



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INTRODUCTION: WHY EVIDENCE-BASED HR AND WHY NOW?



EMAIL

JOHN WHELAN is formerly UK HR Director of BAE Systems, the FTSE 100 defence, security, and aerospace company, whose experience and strengths lie in business and HR Transformation, Organisation Development and Employee Relations. Prior to joining BAE, he held a variety of HR roles in Engineering, Technology and Manufacturing businesses across the Telecommunications and semi-conductor industries including Matra-Marconi Space where he was HR Director for the UK and, latterly, Group HRD.

John Whelan, Director at CRF, introduced the topic of EBHR. He emphasised that EBHR is not a new area; CRF previously researched the topic in a 2011 report entitled *Evidence-based HR: From Fads to Facts?* However, the need for evidence-based practice is now greater than ever due to the following three reasons:

- 1 Information (which may not always be factual) now spreads extremely quickly due to the explosion of social media and different channels of information. We need to carefully think about how we can interpret and make sense of this data.
- 2 The rise in public figures manipulating the truth for their own purposes and the influence this has on society and politics.
- 3 The emergence of generative AI, whereby we can now ask questions, get answers, and produce reports and information without any access to experts.

All of this means that, as practitioners, we need to be able to discriminate between sources of data, find the real evidence among the plethora of information available and make sensible decisions that progress the business strategy.

INTRODUCTION TO EVIDENCE-BASED HR



EMAIL

ROB BRINER is Professor of Organisational Psychology at the School of Business and Management, Queen Mary University of London. He previously worked at Birkbeck College, University of London. His publishing and research have focused on several topics including wellbeing, emotions, stress, motivation and everyday work behaviour.

EVIDENCE-BASED PRACTICE: DEFINITION AND KEY PRINCIPLES

Evidence-based practice evolved to help practitioners make better-informed decisions in identifying problems and opportunities, and choose the interventions that are most likely to help. Whilst practitioners always use evidence, they do not always use multiple sources of evidence, adopt a structured approach to using evidence, or focus on the most trustworthy and relevant evidence. Our use of evidence in decision-making is therefore often sub-optimal, and could be improved by better evidence-based practice.

Evidence-based practice is not a new idea, having emerged in medicine over 30 years ago, and is now used across a wide range of different fields. The key principles of evidence-based practice are:

- 1 **PRINCIPLE**
Incorporate multiple sources and types of evidence and information
- 2 **PRINCIPLE**
Adopt a structured and explicit process of gathering and using evidence
- 3 **PRINCIPLE**
Focus on the most trustworthy and relevant evidence

EVIDENCE-BASED HR

Evidence-based HR (EBHR) is a recent but rapidly growing area which can be defined as below:

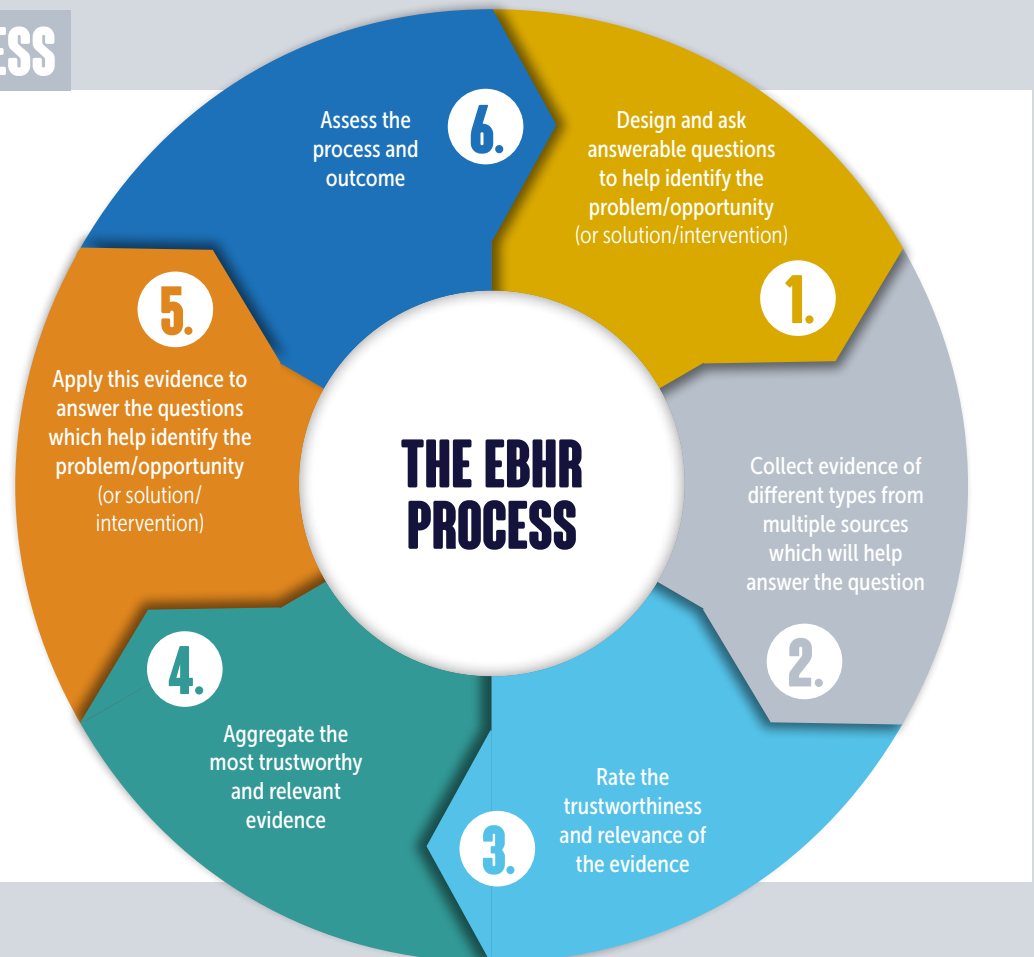
We define EBHR as a process which delivers better-informed and hence more accurate answers to two fundamental questions: first, which are the most important problems (or opportunities) facing the organisation which are relevant to HR activities? Second, which solutions (or interventions) are most likely to help? In other words, what's going on and what can we do about it? These questions are answered through a combination of using the best available evidence and critical thinking.



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THE EBHR PROCESS

In summary, EBHR involves using evidence to reach a better decision or outcome. HR is improving in its use of evidence-based practice, though further improvement is still required. The diagram to the right outlines the six-step process to conducting EBHR. Even if you do not have time to complete every step, these six steps can still be a useful guide to the overall EBHR process.



Prioritisation is also important; focus on the needs of your customers (i.e. the business, stakeholders and employees) and ensure that the problems you are identifying are the most relevant to your organisation.

There are four sources of evidence that HR can use:

- 1 Stakeholders' view and perspectives
- 2 Professional expertise of practitioners
- 3 Evidence from inside the organisation
- 4 Scientific evidence

For each source of evidence, it's important to ask: 'How trustworthy and relevant is this information?' Rob also recommends starting by gathering stakeholders' views, as this will help you understand what the business (and what the people in it) want to do.

The below factors can act as barriers to EBHR:

- * Following fads and fashions which are not evidence-based
- * Organisational pressure to focus on other areas
- * A misguided belief that an organisation already is evidence-based
- * Pressure to act and be seen to be doing something, even if it ineffectual, such as 'security theatre' post 9/11 or 'hygiene theatre' during the pandemic. This both wastes resources and acts as a distraction from more effective action.



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WHERE ARE WE NOW? NINE KEY THEMES FROM OUR RESEARCH

THEME 1

HR AS A FUNCTION NOW HAS ACCESS TO MORE DATA THAN EVER AND IS USING IT MORE, BUT THIS IS NOT NECESSARILY LEADING TO GREATER INSIGHT AND TO MAKING BETTER-INFORMED DECISIONS

THEME 2

MULTIPLE SOURCES OF EVIDENCE ARE USED TO SOME EXTENT BUT NOT ALL ARE USED AS MUCH AS THEY COULD BE (E.G., MORE USE OF SCIENTIFIC EVIDENCE, QUANTITATIVE, AND QUALITATIVE DATA IS IMPORTANT)

THEME 3

UNDERSTANDING AND USE OF EBHR AS A DEFINED PROCESS AND PARTICULAR APPROACH IS LIMITED

THEME 4

SOME ORGANISATIONS ARE DOING SOMETHING VERY CLOSE TO EBHR

THEME 5

EVIDENCE AND DATA SHOULD BE USED TO HELP HR SUPPORT THE BUSINESS IN ACHIEVING ITS GOALS, NOT TO JUSTIFY HR'S EXISTENCE

THEME 6

THINKING ABOUT THE QUALITY OF DATA AND EVIDENCE IS RECOGNISED AS SOMETHING THAT IS IMPORTANT, BUT COULD BE DONE MUCH BETTER

THEME 7

EBHR IS NOT COMPLICATED BUT IT IS DIFFICULT – THERE ARE MANY BARRIERS AND MORE CAPABILITY (BOTH COMPETENCE AND CONFIDENCE) IS REQUIRED

THEME 8

EVIDENCE FROM EXTERNAL BENCHMARKING OR WHAT WORKS FOR OTHERS NEEDS TO BE TREATED CAUTIOUSLY – JUST BECAUSE IT'S USED OR WORKS ELSEWHERE DOESN'T MEAN IT WILL WORK HERE AND POPULAR ACTIVITIES MAY BE FADS

THEME 9

EBHR IS POLITICAL AND THEREFORE STAKEHOLDERS NEED TO BE INCLUDED IN THE DIALOGUE ABOUT EVIDENCE

Q What do you think HR can learn from other functions of the business regarding EBHR?

A *HR can certainly learn from operations, sales, marketing etc., who have often been doing evidence-based practice for longer and more routinely. As well as learning from other functions, HR should also integrate data from different functions together.*

Q Is there an evidence-based way to track productivity and effectiveness?

A *HR can use proxy data to measure this, though in general HR requires a lot of improvement in how it assesses performance. The best available data will not be from one organisation, but multiple. In using it, we need to ask if it is trustworthy, and whether it applies to our organisation and problems. Evidence-based assessment of performance will also likely be a focus of the second phase of this research, which will be published next year.*



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“ CASE STUDY: EVIDENCE-BASED HR AT FIRST BUS



KEVIN GREEN is the Chief People Officer of First Bus. Kevin kicked off a transformational people strategy, which put colleagues and customers first. Kevin has also introduced a step change on Diversity and Inclusion including the company-wide introduction of inclusion networks and a 'Celebrating our Differences' development programme for all managers. Quarterly employee engagement surveys are an integral part of ensuring that First Bus listens to its people and becomes a great place to work.

✉ EMAIL

First Bus is a £950m business and part of FirstGroup, a FTSE 250 company. The organisation has 14,000 employees, with engineers and drivers as its largest teams respectively, and 50 sites in UK and Ireland. It is highly-unionised, with 78 bargaining units.

Emerging from COVID-19, the company faced a range of issues. Customer usage had fallen to 14% of pre-COVID levels, and the pandemic had fundamentally unpicked the commercial structure of the organisation. First Bus had also made a strong commitment to reaching Zero Carbon by 2025, and was additionally navigating the challenge of being a private sector business providing public transport. The organisation therefore needed to reinvent itself, with the aim of moving from an asset driven business to a service driven business.

+ IMPLEMENTING AN EVIDENCE-BASED PEOPLE STRATEGY

First Bus implemented a new, evidence-based people strategy to support the business goal of improving financial performance by a 10% margin by 2025. Key elements of this included:

- **Conducting an extensive diagnosis in the first three months**, using multiple sources of data and insight, including focus groups, examining relationships in certain depots and quarterly engagement surveys across the whole workforce. Data showed that turnover had increased from 20% to over 40% and employees said that they felt under-appreciated and supported.

- **Implementing an iterative process**, that focused on granular, design-led thinking rather than large interventions. This included piloting and testing hypotheses, with an emphasis on trying an activity and seeing if there were results. The data collection processes were also used as an opportunity for HR to test their thinking and conclusions with employees through set pieces, town halls and regular conversations.
- **Focusing on achieving buy in**, with an emphasis on activities that would help to achieve this. HR were clear with the rest of the business that they needed their backing and that any changes needed to be owned by the whole organisation; the new people strategy should be seen as a business process, rather than something which is just done by HR. Additionally, they were upfront with Unions and had an open discussion with them.

+ KEY OUTPUTS INCLUDED:

- The decision to treat their people better. For example, they stopped using a 14-page appraisal form for bus drivers that was not well used and strongly disliked, moving instead to regular conversations focusing on what was going on in employees' lives and how things could be improved for them.
- Removed tasks or processes that were not effective, such as their complaints investigations process.
- Reduced lost mileage, which ultimately made more money for the business and helped to run a better service.

Overall, attrition was halved, engagement increased by 8%, absence decreased and there was an 11% positive shift in employee emotions. These positive results gave credibility to the HR team, and as a result they were asked to do more similar work.

+ SUMMARY: KEY TAKEAWAYS FOR AN EVIDENCE-BASED PEOPLE STRATEGY

Overall, it is important to adopt an agile approach, trying different activities and learning from them. The below three questions are useful questions to keep in mind when reviewing your people strategy, helping you to prioritise and reminding you to continually return to your hypothesis:

- *Why* are we proposing to do this?
- *What* difference do we want to make?
- *How* will we measure it?

EVIDENCE-BASED PEOPLE STRATEGY

1. Treat our people better
2. Change work patterns
3. Improve pay / benefits
4. Create new narrative
5. Overhaul recruitment
6. New focus of leaders and managers

➔ **IMPROVED ENGAGEMENT**

- Reduce negative emotions
- Regular and granular

➔ **PEOPLE METRICS**

- Improved retention
- Less absence
- Reduce disciplinarys and grievance
- Hired more drivers
- More inclusive

➔ **REDUCE LOST MILEAGE**

- Improve frequency

➔ **IMPROVED CUSTOMER NPS**

➔ **BETTER FINANCIAL RESULTS**

- Margin improvement
- ROCE



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HR ANALYTICS IN THE 2020s



NIGEL GUENOLE is an expert in measurement and analytics. He has worked to enhance the quality of psychological measurement in industry and to promote analytical approaches to HRM. His work has appeared in *Harvard Business Review*, *Forbes*, *European CEO Magazine*, and *European Business Review*. He co-authored *The Power of People: Learn how Successful Organizations Use Workforce Analytics to Improve Business Performance*, and recently co-edited a special issue of the *Human Resource Management Journal* on HR Analytics.

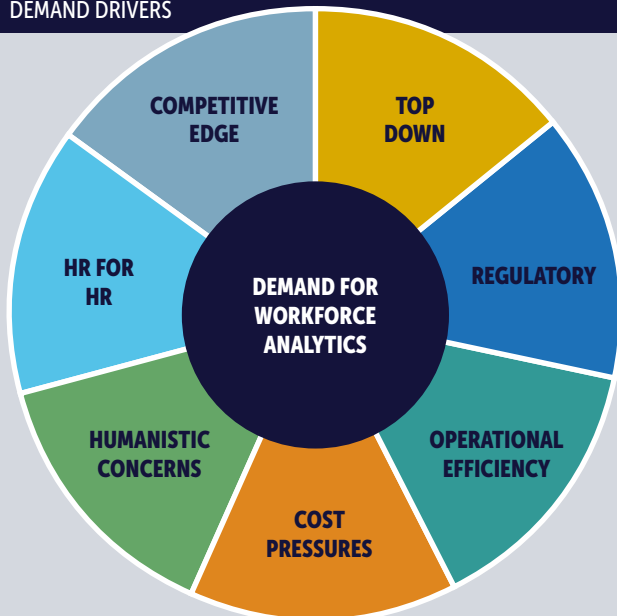
HR ANALYTICS DEFINITION

HR analytics uses statistical methods in the discovery, interpretation, and communication of meaningful patterns in workforce-related data to inform decision making and improve performance (Guenole, Ferrar, & Feinzig, 2017). Nigel noted that this 2017 definition is still applicable, though HR analytics should include more than just local, quantitative data.

Analytics can improve decision outcomes and has changed the way we make decisions about people in many fields, from banking to sport. Within HR, analytics can help us to become more strategic, decisive and informed.

The below diagram summarises the areas driving demand for workforce analytics. This includes top-down pressure, regulatory pressure (such as the drive to improve culture) and the demand to reduce costs (such as investing in technology).

DEMAND DRIVERS



USING HR ANALYTICS

Once you have identified your problem, you can prioritise action based on the below matrix, keeping in mind that achieving a quick win in the early stages can be helpful.

DEMAND DRIVERS

LEVEL OF IMPACT	INDIRECT / PRODUCTIVITY IMPROVEMENT	FAST PATH TO ACTION <i>Easy to implement, delayed returns</i> e.g. Interpret results and prioritise actions following business performance review	LONG-TERM BUSINESS IMPROVEMENT <i>Hard to implement, delayed returns</i> e.g. Enhance client satisfaction and profitability by optimising skill mix on client engagements
	DIRECT / COST REDUCTION	QUICK WIN <i>Easy to implement, fast returns</i> e.g. Improve efficiency of sourcing and recruiting to reduce cost per hire	LONG-TERM COST SAVINGS <i>Hard to implement, fast returns once implemented</i> e.g. Move to new employee self-service HR system
		EASIER / NO CHANGE IN THE WAY WORK GETS DONE	HARDER / SUBSTANTIAL WORKFORCE TRANSFORMATION
EASE OF IMPLEMENTATION			

Remember that advanced analytics are not always required: if simple analysis offers a low risk idea, then go for it! Additionally, expert opinion (e.g. the opinion of a CHRO) is often better than novice analysis.

The below list of metrics for HR analytics readiness, generated from interviews with over 70 Directors of Analytics, can be used as a roadmap in your HR analytics journey:

- A vision and mission for HR analytics
- Clear governance standards
- Stakeholders with business problems
- A way to prioritise projects
- Senior sponsors to champion analytics
- Involvement of the CHRO
- A skilled analytics team leader
- The right skills in the team
- Guidance about when to use externals
- The right analytics technology
- The right data to answer questions
- Succession plan for important skills
- Ability to show ROI and impact
- Analytics embedded throughout the function
- Standardised approach to projects



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APPLICATION OF HR ANALYTICS

Technology has created real improvements in how we can use HR analytics. For example, line managers and employees can now use dashboards to access information quickly. Greater computing capability and power, as well as cloud-based technology, is now readily available, enabling the comparison of thousands of variables. There is also increasingly new talent, such as people who think analytically and have the capability to run different analyses.

There are two broad schools of HR analytics in applied practice:

1 Creative school

- Analytics is mainly used to brainstorm
- Reactive and fast
- Research designs are not evaluated and results are not closely studied
- Emphasises story-telling and correlation (e.g. mediation in cross sectional surveys, emphasis on novel data sources)

2 Technical school

- Analytics is used to inform and decide
- Deliberate and strategic, rather than reactive
- Prioritises certain problems, rather than responding to every request
- Thoughtful research designs, evaluated for effectiveness
- Requires technical capability in senior roles

PEOPLE ANALYTICS AND CAUSAL REASONING

Causal reasoning focuses on changing things that we know actually cause outcomes. To prove a causal effect, you need to: a) show that cause happens before the effect; b) show an association; and c) rule out other causes. Tips for implementing causal reasoning include:

- Experiments and randomisation are a gold standard (though HR rarely has this luxury and is often more focused on observation).
- It's often assumed that we cannot show causation from correlation. However, under the right conditions, we can infer causes from correlations (e.g. economists, computer scientists and epidemiologists all do this).
- Think – do you trust the correlation? To do so, you need to believe that there is nothing else causing the outcome.
- You need to put together models of what the causes and effects are before you can trust the correlation.
- Asking questions such as 'how did you calculate that?' or 'where did that come from?' can help you move into causal thinking.

CASE STUDIES

CASE STUDY 1: EZRA

Ezra offers coaching solutions for the digital age and conducts extensive evaluation related to this. To measure their impact, Ezra implemented a study involving nearly 50,000 coaches. They selected competencies to improve, and then compared the improvement in these with competencies that they did not work on. The mean improvement and alignment increases were highest for the selected competencies, meaning that the most improvement happened in the competencies they focused on and the coaching was therefore effective.

CASE STUDY 2: SOCIAL NETWORK PANELS

Networks refer to relationships between people, with ego-networks describing connections between people we know. An ego-network that is very dense (i.e. contains lots of people that know one another) is less beneficial for developing our own personal networks. A study with a sample of 10,000 people found that female networks were more dense, and that there was a relationship between increased density of a network and decreased probability that the individual was on an advanced performance programme.

CASE STUDY 3: IBM

IBM has been a pioneer in bringing analytics to HR and has extensively worked with new AI technologies for attraction, recruitment and development. In one example, the organisation shared video messages recorded by executives on their corporate intranet, but found that the thousands of comments they received were too extensive to read and synthesize. The organisation decided to apply sentiment analysis and topic models, meaning that reports on sentiment and themes were ready within hours.

CASE STUDY 4: PODIUM

Podium, an organisation that conducts advisory services, worked with one organisation who wanted to improve the diversity and accuracy of their candidate selection processes. Podium looked at the diversity of the different recruiting sources and were able to prioritise certain sources to increase diversity.

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& CASE STUDY: PEOPLE DATA & INSIGHTS AT THE OFFICE FOR NATIONAL STATISTICS



PHILIPPA BONAY is a Fellow of the CIPD, one of 2020's UK 50 Leading Lights in Kindness & Leadership and *HR Magazine's* most influential practitioners. As People and Business Services Director for the ONS (6,000 people), she is responsible for HR, estates, facilities management, H&S, business services and the customer contact centre. She is also the HR Director for the Government Analysis Function (17,000 people) and the Government Statistical Service, a member of the Civil Service HR Function Board and the lead for Civil Service People Analytics and Data.



GEMMA KELLY is Head of People Data and Insights at the ONS. An innovative people data expert with experience delivering strategic data solutions that drive change. Gemma is particularly skilled in building strong relationships with stakeholders, helping to shape high-level requirements to translate into technical deliverables. She is a strong believer that seeking clarity on outcomes is key to ensuring valuable insights and collaborates to review business priorities and engage in understanding how leaders use data and evidence to drive decisions.

People Analytics is about the business, rather than just HR. The top three areas where People Analytics adds value are: business strategy, employee experience and wellbeing, and strategic workforce planning.

People Analytics and insights can be approached as per the below flow diagram. Problem statements may arise from what can be seen in the data, or in what is highlighted by colleagues or senior leaders.

+ DATA AND DATA LITERACY IN PEOPLE ANALYTICS

There are three key ideas required for data-driven HR:

- The what? (knowing your problem statement and business, determining the best sources, conducting analysis and drawing out insights)
- The so what? (telling a story, taking action and showing that these action have been effective)
- The how? (encouraging colleagues to be curious and analytical, growing your People Analytics capability and developing, testing, learning and iterating).

People Analytics requires data and data literacy. Data should be:

- Good quality (it does not have to be a perfect, but you should be aware of any shortcomings and whether the data will be enough for what you need)
- Accessible: is it understandable (including for staff with disabilities) and can people access it easily?

You should also consider what is the most appropriate way to gather data, and whether the data you want actually already exists.

Regarding data literacy, at the Office for National Statistics (ONS), different members of staff have different requirements:

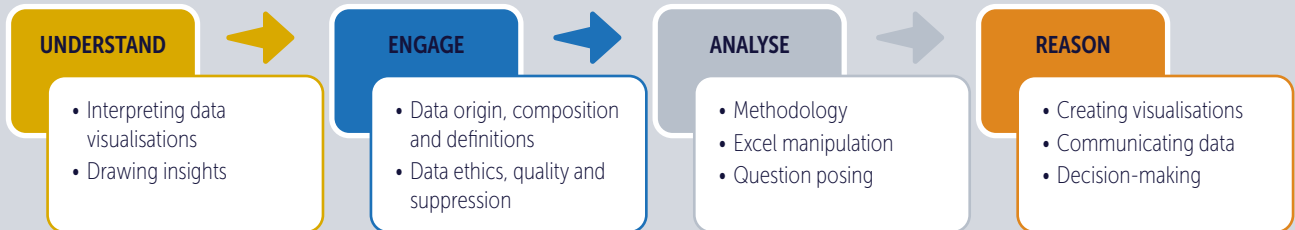
- HR colleagues need to interpret and understand the narrative from the data, using analysis and insight.
- Managers should actively use data to deliver in their roles.
- Everyone should be comfortable in using data to tell stories.

PEOPLE ANALYTICS AND INSIGHTS



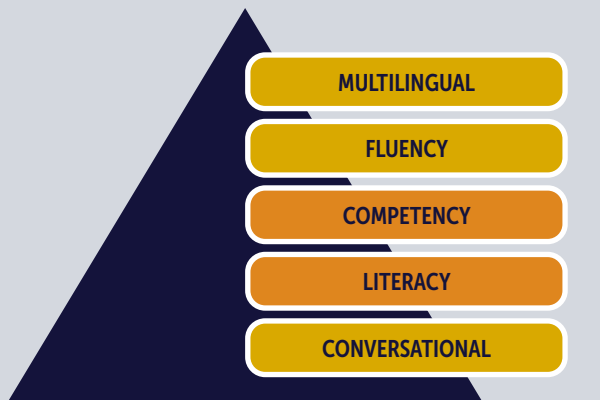
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DATA LITERACY PATHWAY



To help with this, the ONS developed a data literacy pathway, with content based on the four pillars of data literacy: understand, engage, analyse, and reason. Each pillar has multiple learning modules that can be completed at self-pace.

LEVELS OF DATA LITERACY



To support their use of People Analytics, the ONS uses different kinds of dashboards, including:

- People Plan and Risk Dashboard (risk management of people outcomes to drive business outcomes)
- Our People Dashboard (enables self-service access to answer straightforward people data questions)
- Inclusion, Culture and Wellbeing Dashboard (shows progress against inclusion, diversity and wellbeing objectives).



CASE STUDY

TAKING ACTION ON RACE

A range of indicators across the employee lifecycle showed less favourable outcomes for colleagues from an ethnic minority background. This included negative recruitment and retention differentials, negative pay and bonus gaps, and qualitative data showing colleagues' feelings of exclusion. The ONS decided to implement a multi-faceted approach to address these issues, which included:

- A focused development programme, Ethnic Minorities into Leadership.
- A new programme focused on retention, support and career building – ONS connected.
- An interactive virtual escape room as a team learning exercise featuring a fictitious organisation. This centred around a scenario where a minority employee is leaving, and used experience that has actually come from colleagues in the ONS.
- Holding senior leaders to account with three key areas for focus and improvement.

Delivering all of the above required collaboration across a range of stakeholders including people analytics, people capability, their ethnic minority network, senior leaders in the business and expert external providers. Visible buy in and commitment from senior leaders was also important to help the initiatives land well and become embedded.

As a result, there has been an increased representation of new starters from an ethnic minority background and pay gaps are reducing. The ONS are also starting to see turnover reduce for ethnic minority colleagues and there has been a slight drop in recruitment differential.

There has not yet been a sufficient reduction in bonus gaps, so the ONS are taking a deep dive into this topic to find out the reasons for this. More generally, they are also about to embark on a second round of Hold to Account discussions with specific objectives agreed by each business sector.



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CASE STUDY: EVIDENCE-BASED HR AT AB SUGAR



EMAIL

DR QUINTIN HEATH is a Human Resources Director with a deep interest in transforming businesses through cultural change, major organisation redesign and organisational effectiveness programmes. He has previously worked in retail, higher education, and airline catering. In 2001 he joined Associated British Foods and for them has worked in Twinings, UK Grocery, the Sugar division and, now the Bakery Ingredients business, AB Mauri.

AB Sugar is the world's leading sugar company, with 32,000 employees and a revenue of £2.1bn. In 2014, they bought a Chinese agricultural company with the aim to transform Chinese agriculture. However, they faced issues with lower performance, including lower yields in both the field and mechanisation. Agriculture was perceived as a second-class department when compared to sales or operations, and the knowledge transfer from UK businesses had not been successful.

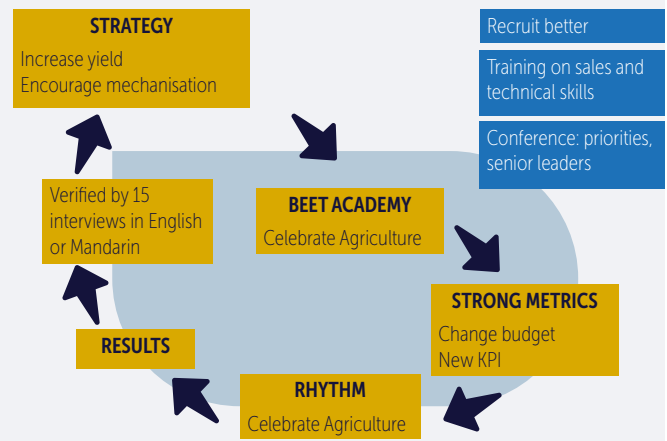
To address these issues, AB Sugar implemented an intervention to increase yield in the field and encourage mechanisation. This is summarised in the diagram to the right and included:

- Conducting extensive OD work.
- Creating the 'Beet academy' to celebrate agriculture and create change.
- Conducting training related to sales and technical skills, and focusing on recruiting better.
- Updating the metrics the department was working toward, focusing on how the business would work in the future.
- Collaborating with Finance to change their budgeting process.

The intervention was verified through qualitative evidence in the form of interviews with senior managers. These were conducted in English and Mandarin and analysed with software. Insight gained from these interviews included the need to inspire people through values and the need to change the workflow (i.e. to stop doing certain actions just because that was how things had been done in the past).

After the five-year intervention, there was a four-fold increase in the mechanised area and sugar yields increased 25% y-o-y (though with the caveat that they were not able to isolate that these changes certainly only occurred due to the AB Sugar intervention).

ACADEMY INTRODUCED TO CREATE CHANGE



STRENGTHENING OUR PRACTICE OF EVIDENCE-BASED HR



EMAIL

WENDY HIRSH works as a researcher and consultant, specialising in the future-oriented aspects of people management: workforce planning, sustainable organisational performance, succession, talent management and career development. She is a Principal Associate of the Institute for Employment Studies and Visiting Professor at both Derby and Kingston Universities. Wendy works across private, public and third sectors. She is the author with Rob Briner of CRF's 2011 study, *Evidence-Based HR: From Fads to Facts*.

EVIDENCE-BASED HR CHALLENGES AND GAPS

Wendy began by emphasising that many parts of HR are based on no evidence or data at all, and in some areas, workforce data has actually got worse as it has become harder to access.

The follow factors are all barriers to the implementation of evidence-based HR:

- **Inherent features of people management**, including the context specific nature of HR and the subjective employment experience. Additionally, there is too much emphasis on 'best practice' rather than 'best fit,' and costs and benefits are hard to quantify.
- **Accessing relevant and robust evidence.** In HR, we often work with data systems that are designed to help with administration, rather than analysis, and internal data is often hard to access. Scientific evidence can also be difficult to access; it is scattered across multiple journals and academic research has drifted away from practice.



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It also primarily focuses on executives, rather than managers of all levels and general employees. There is additionally a large body of grey literature available to support, but it must be used with care.

*** Politics and power dynamics.** HR is a very political function which involves significant interaction with powerful people with strong (and often not evidence-based) views. This requires HR to stand up to leadership if leadership goals are not what the business needs in the long term.

*** Skills and culture of the HR profession.** People in HR have not historically been analytical or IT savvy, though this is changing. Evaluation is not always practised and concepts and habits of reflective practice are not yet mature.

QUICK WINS FOR EVIDENCE-BASED HR

The following quick wins are actions that HR practitioners can take with immediate effect, using technology and approaches that they likely already have.

1 Sense-check your arguments and evidence

The following example questions can be a useful way to sense-check your evidence in the run up to a decision:

- Are we clear about the issue actually is? Would stakeholders recognise it?
- Can we measure it?
- Have we done something like this before? (e.g. repeatedly changing a performance management form and expecting different overall performance results).
- What is the logic behind our decision? Can we identify a cause and an effect? (this may not necessarily be clear when looking at future-focused tasks).
- In our own professional judgement, do we really think this is going to work?
- Once we're near the point of a decision, are key stakeholders brought into the proposed solution?
- Do we have the organisational capability and resources to implement our decision? Will managers be supported (including by HR)?

2 Use existing data better and more often

Throughout the decision-action-review cycle, HR practitioners should dig deeper into the existing data and think carefully about how it is used. Continually question the trustworthiness of data and bring together different sources of data (including external data when relevant).

3 Benchmark what works

Focus on benchmarking what works, rather than on what other organisations are doing. Possible questions to ask when benchmarking HR policies and practices include:

- Why was this approach chosen?
- What have been the effects of this practice?
- What would be done differently if you were doing the practice again?

4 Focus on implementation, not just design

Consider the practical implications from an evidence-based point of view (this is easily overlooked when creating strategies or policies). For example, consider practical issues that might arise when implementing policies with different levels and types of employees (i.e. not just the 'model' employee). Also consider conducting a pilot before rolling out a new intervention.

5 Evaluate to improve

Evaluate with the idea of improvement in mind and consider the best time points to conduct evaluations. Potential evaluation questions include:

- What metrics can we use to track the change?
- Do we need baseline data?
- Can we try to link direct impacts with business outcomes?
- Which stakeholder groups should be involved in collecting evidence?
- When and with whom should we share the results of this evaluation? (It is usually good practice to share the results with the people who provided their data).

BUILDING LONGER-TERM EVIDENCE-BASED HR CAPABILITY

Below, some possible ways to improve EBHR in the long-term are outlined, including changes in infrastructure and behaviour:

1 Collaborating within HR and across the business, working across HR and with other functions. This includes co-designing to improve solutions and support implementation.

2 Reaching out for trustworthy external evidence, such as using grey literature carefully and with an instinct for what's trustworthy, as well as extending networks (including with researchers).

3 Improving internal data systems. Senior engagement with investment in systems, data and tools is often low. There is a need to better link HR and business data, especially regarding costs and productivity.

4 Evidence-based innovation. Use evidence to come up with ideas that might work better and then pilot and evolve solutions.

5 Strengthening HR's evidence-based skills and behaviour. Adopt a business-minded approach. Role modelling, reflective practice and analytical skills (both generic and specialised) are also important.



STRONG FOUNDATIONS: EVIDENCE-BASED HR


! NEXT STEPS

This one-day event presented the findings from the first phase of CRF's evidence-based HR research project. The second phase of the project will be released in 2024 and will have a greater focus on practical suggestions to help HR professionals become more evidence-based. This will include frameworks, models, tools, checklists and more. If you have any experiences related to this that you would like to share, please contact Research Director **Gillian Pillans** gillian@crforum.co.uk

crf UPCOMING EVENTS

 ONLINE
[Strong Foundations: Evidence-Based HR](#)
(🕒) 14th June, 14.00 BST, Online

Register →

 ONLINE
[Reimagining HR Business Partnering](#)
(🕒) 30th June, 12.00 BST, Online

Register →

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Course completed at your own pace, in your own space

Data and analytics are the future of HR. This course will prepare you for that future: arming you with the practical tools to drive invaluable insights around business issues, influence decision making and drive organisational performance.

FURTHER READING

CRF. 2011. *Evidence-based HR – From Fads to Facts*. Research Report. <https://www.crforum.co.uk/research-and-resources/evidence-based-hr-from-fads-to-facts-2>

CRF. 2017. *Strategic Workforce Analytics*. Research Report. <https://www.crforum.co.uk/research-and-resources/research-report-strategic-workforce-analytics>

CRF. 2023. *Strong Foundations: Evidence-Based HR*. Research Report. <https://www.crforum.co.uk/research-and-resources/research-strong-foundations-evidence-based-hr>

Guenole, N., Ferrar, J., and Feinzig, S. 2017. *The Power of People: Learn How Successful Organizations Use Workforce Analytics to Improve Business Performance*