



EVIDENCE-BASED HR ADVISORY BREAKFAST: A NEW PARADIGM

CRF's research breakfast on 11th October 2023 brought together senior HR practitioners to discuss their perspectives about what evidence-based HR (EBHR) means, how HR practitioners are currently using evidence, and any barriers to them becoming more evidence based. The discussion will help shape CRF's research **Evidence-Based HR: A New Paradigm**, which will be published in January 2024.

Gillian Pillans, CRF's Research Director, and **Rob Briner**, CRF Research Associate and Professor of Organisational Psychology at the School of Business and Management, Queen Mary University of London, chaired the discussion. This summary shares some of the key insights from the session.

HOW EVIDENCE-BASED IS THE HR PROFESSION IN YOUR EXPERIENCE?

- Participants shared a general consensus that HR is currently approximately in the middle of a 1-10 scale regarding how well they use evidence-based practice. Several respondents also stated that they think the use of evidence is improving in HR.
- The maturity of evidence-based practice varies according to different parts of HR. For example, HR functions that are involved in business investments will need to create tested business cases. The extent to which HR uses evidence also depends on what we count as evidence.
- Whilst HR does use scientific principles, its overall use of evidence is more an art than science, as the profession deals with people and involves a lot of personal judgement.

WHAT DOES EVIDENCE-BASED HR MEAN?

According to participants, evidence-based HR is:

- The use of internal data. For example, one participant shared that they produce a culture dashboard every quarter for the board, including turnover, sickness and engagement survey data.

- The use of data to make future decisions ('If we try this, then what might happen?').
- Linked to business outcomes. It goes beyond merely having data to actually generating what the impact is on the business (e.g. helping leaders understand the impact of high turnover on business outcomes).
- The use of external evidence or studies, such as research that has relevancy to your organisation. This should be used to inform learning and decision making in an organised way.
- Qualitative data, used to review or validate previous actions and inform future actions.
- A way to measure the effectiveness of an organisation's products, including how and when people are using them.
- A way of supporting 'gut feelings' or instinct.
- Not only a measurement that occurs after you have taken action, but to iteratively inform activity as it evolves.

Rob Briner then provided the definition of evidence-based HR that previous CRF research has used, outlined below.

The three core principles of evidence-based practice are:

1. Incorporate multiple sources and types of evidence and information.
2. Adopt a structure and explicit process of gathering and using evidence.
3. Focus on the most trustworthy and relevant evidence.

Specifically, EBHR is a process which delivers better-informed answers to two fundamental questions:

1. Which are the most important problems (or opportunities) facing the organisation which are relevant to HR activities?
1. Second, which solutions (or interventions) are most likely to help?

In other words, what's going on and what can we do about it?



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HOW DO YOU USE EVIDENCE AT YOUR ORGANISATION?

Participants shared examples of how they have used evidence in large scale interventions:

- One member shared that their organisation recently launched a greatly enhanced, market leading parental leave policy. This was triggered by the following evidence: the organisation was behind the market, engagement surveys showed that people were leaving because of the current policy and there were difficulties in attracting new hires.
- Another participant shared their Workday implementation. This was driven by the desire to know their specific people costs in more detail and deploy their people more effectively, and included first building a strong business case. This business case took around a year to build and involved creating a detailed analysis of all activities in HR. It's difficult to find time to do this in the day to day – it's therefore important to also find quicker, easier ways to use evidence, in addition to these large interventions.
- Others shared how they use professional judgement or expertise, often mixed with quantitative data.

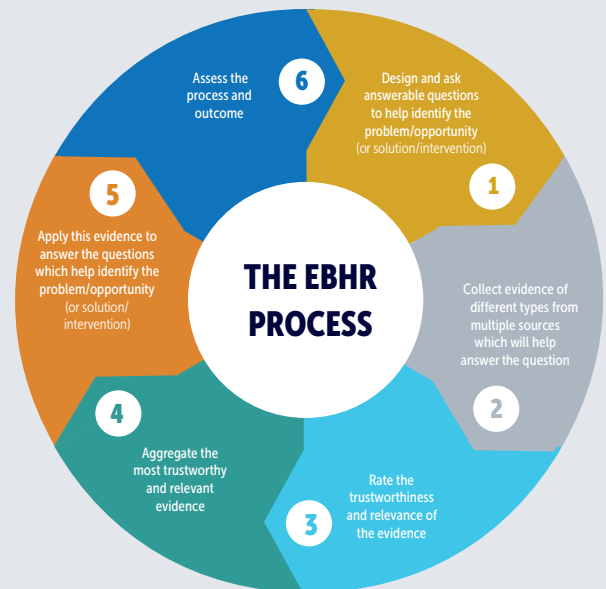
DO YOU TAKE AN EXPLICIT OR STRUCTURED APPROACH TO EVIDENCE?

Members shared that they use the following approaches:

- Complex problem solving, hypothesis testing, decision tree making and options (including being conscious on when to stop gathering data).
- Heat maps to assess different options, informed by qualitative and quantitative data. This helps more easily communicate the pros and cons to stakeholders.
- Several respondents shared how they always use evidence in decision-making, even if it is not necessarily highly structured. For example, one member shared that whenever anyone in their team presents a plan, they need to also identify the opportunity for the business and the business case or evidence to back it up.
- Similarly, members noted that the number of decisions we make a day means that we can't always use a very structured process to gathering evidence. Instead, they highlighted the need to tailor the level of evidence or analysis to each problem, according to its risk, investment or impact.
 - One respondent shared a list of simple questions they ask to help their colleagues consider evidence and, if answered, likely mean their approach is 'good enough': what problem are you trying to solve? What other options did you consider? What do you think the impact will be on A, B, C, or D?

CRF'S 6-STEP EBHR PROCESS

Rob Briner presented CRF's 6-step EBHR process, which can help HR practitioners to take a more structured process to identifying solutions. This type of approach means that, even if some steps are missed due to resourcing constraints, you will at least be aware that this has occurred. Participants shared that they often go through all these steps when identifying interventions, though may do so unconsciously rather than explicitly.



EVIDENCE-BASED HR INFORMATION SOURCES

Rob Briner shared the four main sources of information we can use in EBHR:

- Stakeholders' views and perspectives
- Professional expertise of practitioners
- Evidence from inside the organisation
- Scientific evidence

In response to this, participants shared the following:

- Due to the number of requests HR can receive, it's important to sometimes prove why you *shouldn't* do something when gathering internal views.
- It's important to also anticipate the views of board members with a particular perspective and be able to present evidence that is relevant to them.
- Stakeholders are not just senior executives – also consider the evidence from your front line workers.



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BARRIERS TO EBHR

Participants shared the following barriers to becoming more evidence based:

- Lack of capability.
- Pressure from senior management to spend more time on identifying solutions than problems. There may be strong egos who are not interested in diagnosis or finding out the 'why'.
- Difficulty to find time looking at these macro topics, such as taking a structured approach to evidence, when focused on completing day to day tasks.
- Relational problems – the lack of a strong relationship with CEOs, Financial Directors or Managing Directors etc. can make it difficult to understand what is on their agenda.
- The siloed nature of some HR functions.
- A misunderstanding that EBHR only means using data, rather than multiple types of evidence.

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

crf UPCOMING EVENT



CRF's upcoming research **Evidence-Based HR: A New Paradigm** will be published in January 2024, with a corresponding in-person [event](#) on Thursday 25th January and an online [event](#) on Wednesday 7th February.

If you have any further questions or comments, please contact CRF Research Associate, Rob Briner, rob@crforum.co.uk

These advisory breakfast summary notes were prepared by [Jo Nayler](#), Senior Research Executive at CRF.