



EVIDENCE-BASED HR A NEW PARADIGM

On 25th January 2024, CRF members gathered in-person to explore the subject of evidence-based HR (EBHR). The event built on previous learning about how and when HR should use evidence-based practice, outlining new CRF research which provides a framework for using EBHR. Speakers also took a broader view, assessing HR's progress in becoming more evidence-based as an industry. The day 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

- 01** HR has not always had a good reputation for adding value in organisations, but evidence-based practice allows practitioners to point to where they have brought about tangible benefits. 
- 02** CRF's new report provides an easy-to-follow framework for implementing an evidence-based process across an organisation. 
- 03** EBHR is achieving wider adoption than in previous years, but there is still some way to go – even experienced practitioners always have room for improvement. 
- 04** An evidence-based process can be carried out over the course of an entire year, or as little as a matter of weeks, as long as you follow the core principles. 
- 05** Key to any evidence-based process is spending time identifying the business issues or opportunities that HR is seeking to address. 
- 06** It is important not to get hung up on implementing a 'perfect' evidence-based process, but instead to start where you are. Even becoming a little more evidence-driven is likely to lead to better decisions. 
- 07** Evidence-based practice should incorporate multiple sources of evidence, adopt a structured approach to evidence and focus on the most trustworthy and relevant evidence. 
- 08** Stakeholders should be brought in not just as sources of evidence, but as participants in the process at large to ensure buy-in at all levels of the organisation. It is vital to bring stakeholders on board as early as possible in the process. 
- 09** While EBHR is methodical and structured, practitioners should be flexible and ready to change course if new evidence or practical constraints make it necessary. 
- 10** Evidence-based practice is not always easy, and can require practitioners to change the way they have done things for many years – professionals should be wary of easy wins and catch-all solutions without a problem. 



EVIDENCE-BASED HR: A NEW PARADIGM

INTRODUCTION THE STATE OF PLAY

Mike Haffenden, Chairman at CRF, introduced the topic of EBHR. He reflected on previous decades in the industry when EBHR techniques were not commonly used, compared to the state of play now where things are improving. However, the need for education around evidence-based practice remains. He summed up the situation as follows:

- HR has *“not always had a great reputation for adding value”* outside of the profession. EBHR allows practitioners to create a process, methodology and framework for everything they do, enabling them to analyse and identify business problems before going on to solve them.
- There are many examples of people using EBHR on a day-to-day basis, which indicate real progress is being made.
- While more people are using evidence-based techniques than ever, the situation remains mixed. There are still HR practitioners out there who are not using EBHR on a regular basis. Many opportunities for improvement still remain.

He concluded by pointing out that there is *“no point saying something is not good if you don’t offer a solution”*. That is why CRF, along with Associate Research Director Rob Briner, has devised a framework for taking an evidence-based approach.

WATCH THE ONLINE EVENT HERE:
EVIDENCE-BASED HR: A NEW PARADIGM



RESEARCH SUMMARY



ROB BRINER is Professor of Organisational Psychology at Queen Mary, University of London and Associate Research Director at CRF. He is also currently a Visiting Professor of Evidence-Based HRM at Birkbeck University of London and Professor at Oslo Nye Høyskole. He was previously co-founder and Scientific Director of the Center for Evidence-Based Management and has held positions at the Institute for Employment Studies, London School of Economics, Kings’ College (University of London), Bath University and University of Edinburgh. His publishing and research focus on topics including wellbeing, emotions, stress, motivation and everyday work behaviour.

EMAIL
SLIDES

Rob Briner, CRF’s Associate Research Director and Professor of Organisational Psychology at the School of Business and Management at Queen Mary University of London, introduced CRF’s new report: [Evidence-Based HR: A New Paradigm](#), as well as some of the themes that came from the research.

Evidence-based practice has been applied across a plethora of different industries: policing, education, architecture and medicine, to name a few. It provides a general model for how to be effective as a practitioner, which suggests that it is not just what you do that is important, but how you go about deciding to do it.

THE SURVEY RESULTS

EBHR relies on gathering information from four different sources:

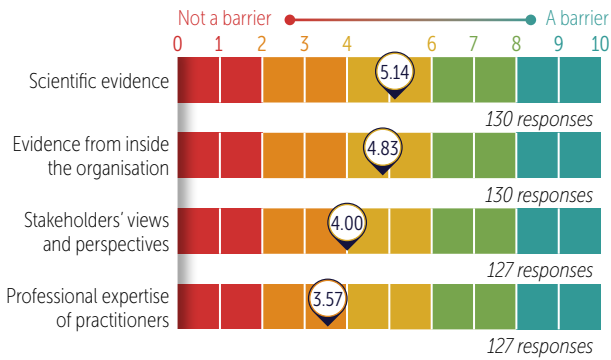
- Scientific evidence
- Evidence from inside the organisation
- Stakeholders’ views and perspectives
- Professional expertise of practitioners

CRF surveyed members on how easy it is to access these different categories. The results were as follows:



EVIDENCE-BASED HR: A NEW PARADIGM

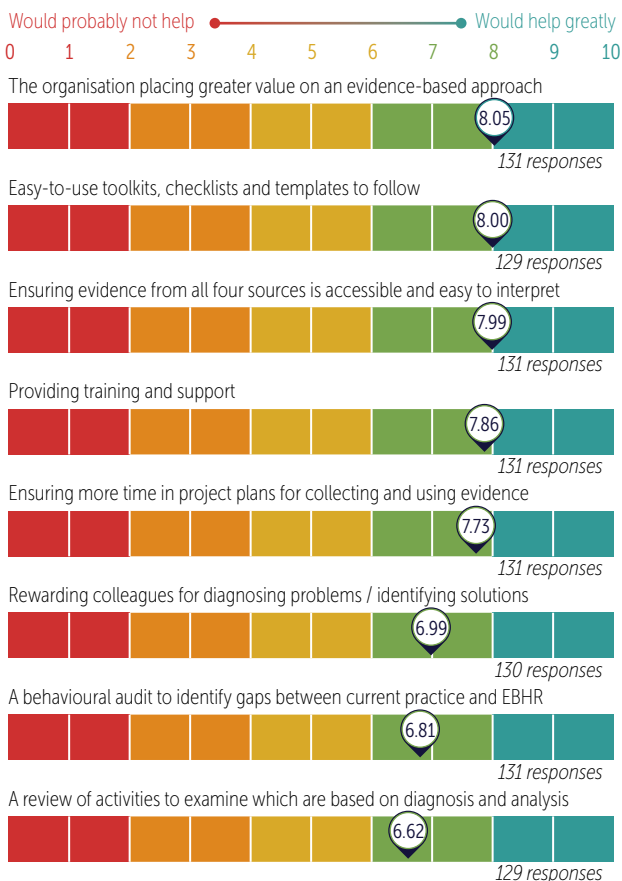
Are difficulties accessing the four sources of evidence a barrier to doing more EBHR?



Source: CRF Member Survey, Evidence-Based HR: A New Paradigm 2023

Another survey question was around factors which would help practitioners use EBHR more. The results were as follows:

How would you rate the following as potential facilitators for doing more EBHR?



Source: CRF Member Survey, Evidence-Based HR: A New Paradigm 2023

The results suggest that one of the barriers is that senior leaders within HR do not place enough value on evidence-based techniques. If they did, people may well use EBHR more.

THEMES FROM SENIOR PRACTITIONER INTERVIEWS

CRF's research also included interviews with 20 senior HR practitioners, which highlighted practical recommendations on how to improve EBHR. Key messages included:

START WITH THE BUSINESS ISSUE

"The journey we've been on started by saying, 'well, what's the problem we're trying to solve?' I think that's a really easy conversation that you can have with CEOs, boards, executive teams. So let's not get on and fix something without understanding the problem but let's start by scoping. Actually, what's the problem? What's the issue? And then saying, let's go and get the quantitative and qualitative data and evidence that helps us to understand what the solutions might be to that."

NEIL MORRISON, GROUP HR DIRECTOR, SEVERN TRENT

LEADERSHIP AND ROLE-MODELLING ARE ESSENTIAL

"I think leadership from the top is really important and creating an appetite and an excitement around it in the senior leadership team, rather than people thinking you know, it's just another thing we have to do."

PHILIPPA BONAY, DIRECTOR FOR OPERATIONS, OFFICE FOR NATIONAL STATISTICS

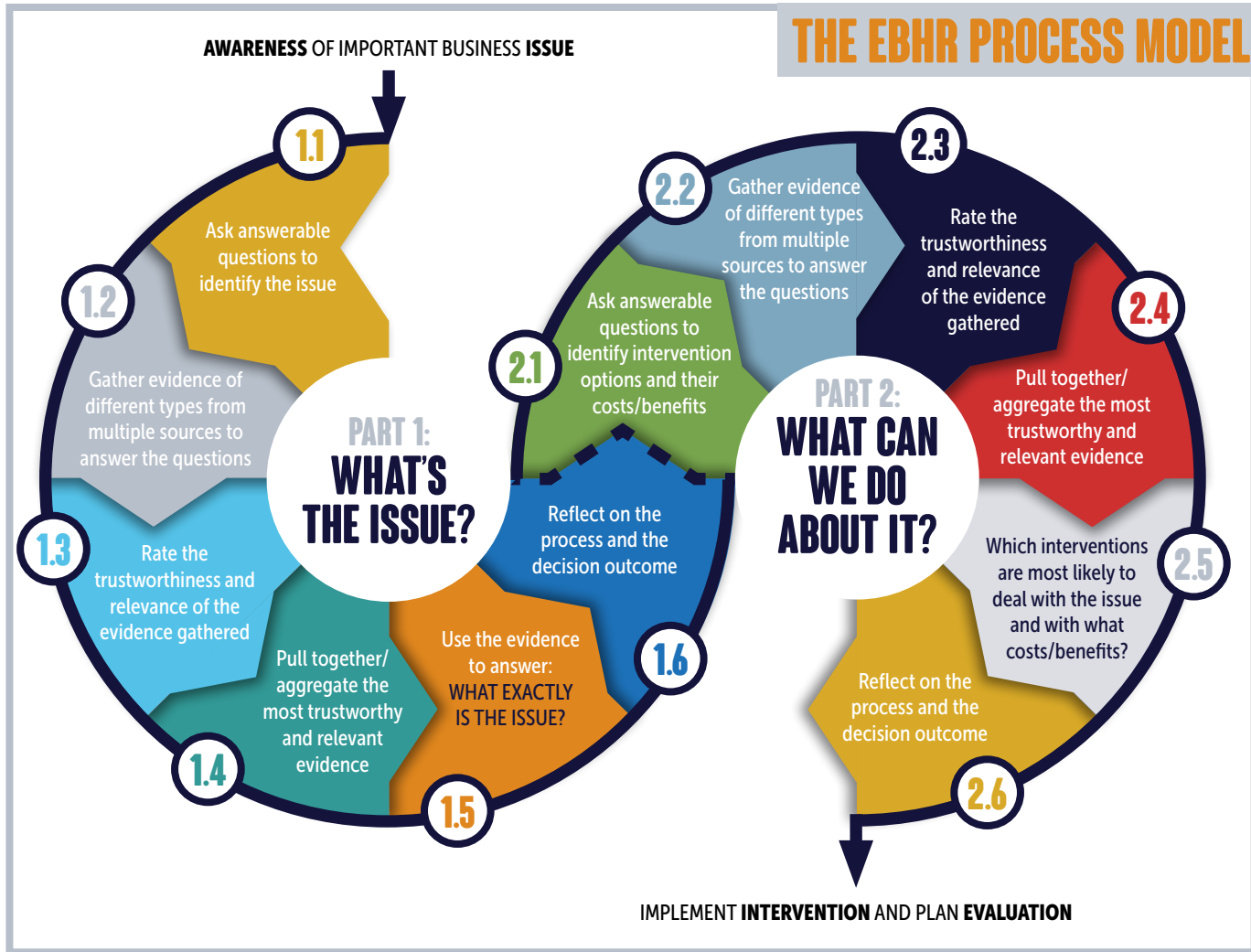
USE DIFFERENT TYPES OF EVIDENCE TO BUILD A CLEARER PICTURE

"Using a lot of evidence of different types, the qualitative and the quantitative and the external together, it's possible to do something that initially people would think is not possible or sensible for the organisation to do."

KATE MATHIAS, CHIEF PEOPLE OFFICER, CLYDE & CO



EVIDENCE-BASED HR: A NEW PARADIGM



CRF's new EBHR process model is designed to make it easier to use evidence-based techniques. A supplementary toolkit also helps with this.

The EBHR toolkit includes:

- Rating trustworthiness and relevance of evidence** – a scoring-based questionnaire to help assess whether evidence can actually be trusted.
- Bias checker** – a similar system to assess whether users are bringing in pre-existing biases.
- Fad detector** – a list of red flags for fads, including whether something is falsely encouraging, overly simple, attractive, or one-size-fits-all.
- EBHR cheat sheet checklist** – a list of points to help assess the extent to which practitioners are actually using an evidence-based approach.

Finally, the process model comes with some frequently asked questions. They are as follows:

? **Do we need to apply EBHR to everything we do?**

Sometimes it's not appropriate or just not possible. For example, if we simply have to implement a policy or practice because of compliance constraints, or if it is just too late to start the EBHR process because decisions have already been made which can't be changed regarding the nature of the issue and/or which solution should be implemented.



EVIDENCE-BASED HR: A NEW PARADIGM

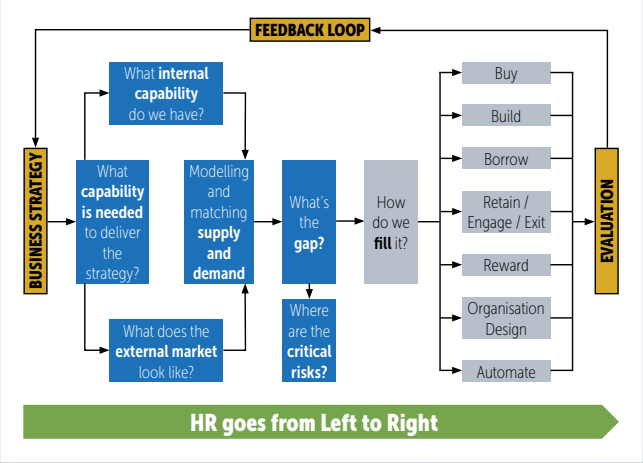
? Is it necessary to follow every single part of the process?

There may be practical constraints which mean you cannot follow the whole process and also good reasons why you should not follow the whole process. This is about making a better-informed decision, so even following parts of the process will help.

? Is it necessary to gather evidence from all four sources?

There may be practical constraints which mean you cannot get evidence from all the sources and good reasons why you do not need evidence from all four. This is about making a better-informed decision so even if you do not use evidence from all sources, using evidence from some will still help.

Building Capability



DEFINING THE BUSINESS ISSUE



NICK HOLLEY as Director of CRF Learning has responsibility to provide development for HR teams and senior professionals. Prior to joining CRF, Nick spent 10 years at Henley Business School where he was a Visiting Professor and Director of the Centre for HR Excellence. He has developed and delivered HR capability programmes for organisations across the UK and Europe, and internationally.



HR's purpose, says Nick Holley, Director of CRF Learning, is "not to do HR 'stuff' but to build the capability of an organisation to deliver its strategy and create sustainable value for its key stakeholders". To that end, HR moves in a left-to-right sequence, beginning with the business strategy and ending with actions such as buy, build or reward, followed by evaluating the process. In between is where EBHR comes in.

- 1 **Beware of gurus:** These are people who give convincing or inspiring lectures or advice, but whose lessons are not backed up by anything concrete.
- 2 **Beware of bright shiny objects:** This is something new or impressive. It might appear to give us the answer to all of our problems, but is not based on proper evidence.
- 3 **Beware of Best Practice:** The idea of Best Practice is irrelevant without context. Just because another organisation is doing something right does not mean everybody should do it.
- 4 **Beware of shouty people:** This might come in the form of a bossy manager demanding a new sales training programme or a new employee retention scheme. This is where evidence comes in useful, enabling practitioners to point to possible reasons for what is upsetting the manager.

To conclude, identifying the business problem can sometimes enable HR to stop doing things or hold back on bringing in new measures that are not making a difference to the issue that needs addressing. This frees up more time to address actual business problems in an evidence-based way.



EVIDENCE-BASED HR: A NEW PARADIGM

CASE STUDY EBHR AT SHELL



EMAIL

DR. THOMAS RASMUSSEN is Vice President Organisational Development and Learning at Shell. Thomas was previously Senior Vice President, Digital & Automation, People & Culture for sustainable energy company Vestas, Executive General Manager Employee Experience, Digital & Analytics at National Australia Bank, and VP HR Data & Analytics at Shell. He received his M.Sc. and Ph.D. in Psychology from the University of Aarhus, Denmark, still does research for fun – papers on HR Analytics with Dave Ulrich (2015, 2023), and his main interest is bridging management science with practical application, showing the importance of people in value chains.

Shell, the oil, gas and energy major, has more than 90,000 people operating across nearly 100 countries. For Thomas Rasmussen, Vice President of HR Data & Analytics, that means using evidence-based techniques is crucial in decision-making.

Rasmussen leans heavily on academic study and data in the research process. He encourages people to carry out cross-sectional studies and then compare them to academic studies, *“then you know what to look for”*. He also stresses that most things are quantified in money. HR should follow suit to get senior leaders to care.

All this has led him to surmise HR is about three things: skills, motivation and opportunity to contribute to the broader business.

- Skills** – it is about who you hire. That means it is also about who you attract with interest, and so also about employee benefits.
- Motivation** – then, when you’ve hired people, it is about the jobs you put them in, the quality of their managers and the on-the-job learning programmes available to them.
- Opportunities to contribute** – this is where the DEI agenda is, decisions over how people work (hybrid working) and headcount management.

IDENTIFYING THE PROBLEM

Identifying the business problem or opportunity is doubly important at such a large company. Shell looked to safety, a key part of its upstream businesses, and carried out a study which sought to quantify the connection between employee engagement and workplace accidents. It found that a 1% increase in engagement, something which was mostly driven by the quality of employees’ closest leaders, led to a 4% decrease in accidents.

This allowed Rasmussen to tell superiors that motivating employees will cause a tangible outcome: improved safety. He says: *“If you use evidence, you have the opportunity to have an even better impact.”*

- Q How did you go about adding the academic capability? Is it a central team, or have you embedded the skillset right through the HR function?**
A *We hired people with PhDs. Areas of expertise typically included data science, social sciences, psychology and econometrics. We have a team of seven or eight of those people, and they analyse the data to help us determine what we should be looking at, what are the opportunities and what are the problems. We keep them separate from the management information and reporting team, which is very different.*
- Q When do you take an evidence-based approach and when do you not? What tests do you apply as to whether EBHR is specifically needed?**
A *We try to anticipate what decisions we are going to make in advance. That way, we have the evidence ready to insert into a strategic discussion and that helps improve decision quality. That means you need access to strategy conversations about what is of concern across the business.*
- Q How do you put together an overall HR plan for such a big and varied business?**
A *Shell is a large portfolio of various different businesses, and they differ widely across different disciplines. Within that, there are big variations even on a regional level. So it’s about having the right mix of what really drives value across the board. DEI for example works well in this sense.*



EVIDENCE-BASED HR: A NEW PARADIGM



CASE STUDY EBHR DEI REVIEW AT FCA



IRENE UWEJEYAH is the Programme Manager for the Financial Conduct Authority's diversity, equity and inclusion programme and has overseen the implementation of its evidence-based DEI programme. Prior to working at the FCA, Irene worked in Corporate Responsibility and community engagement roles across the private and not-for-profit sectors.

- EMAIL
- SLIDES

In 2021, Irene Uwejeayah led a review of the **Financial Conduct Authority's (FCA) Diversity, Equity & Inclusion Programme**, using a multi-year EBHR process. An evidence-based approach of this scale, she admits, would not have been possible without the backing of the executive committee. She began by asking the following questions between July and October 2021:

- How effective are our existing interventions?
- How can we reflect the current DEI landscape and fit the needs of the FCA?
- How will our DEI work support the overall FCA strategy?
- Clearly defined objectives – what should our priorities be and outcomes?

The next stage involved gathering evidence from both internal and external sources. Uwejeayah's team also spoke to HR practitioners in other organisations. They were careful not to immediately copy-and-paste their counterparts' findings.

Over the course of this phase, from October 2021 to February 2022, the project team of four people worked their way through 250 pieces of evidence, categorising and ranking each one by severity and scale.

The next stage involved aggregating the data into a visual matrix to identify the most pressing issues within the organisation, opposite.

The FCA placed great importance on identifying the business issue before planning any interventions. The second part of the process was more than six months in, before Uwejeayah and her team presented their initial findings to the executive committee.

The team then moved onto the next stage, which took place from April to June 2022: deciding what interventions

Impact RAYG Matrix

		1	2	3	4
SCALE	FCA	1	2	3	4
	ED Division	2	3	4	5
	Directorate	3	4	5	6
	Department	4	5	6	7
	Localised	5	6	7	8
		1	2	3	4
		Minor	Moderate	Significant	Severe
		SEVERITY			

to carry out. These took place across 13 areas of focus, from expanding DEI targets and providing better resources for the programme, all the way to hybrid working plans.

Uwejeayah says the hardest thing about the entire journey was ensuring she was just as meticulous in working out how to apply the process as she was at the start of the EBHR process back in 2021.

- Q How do you get people at the organisation to accept an evidence-based approach?**
A *Leadership is powerful. I got our chief people officer, Siobhán Sheridan, to explain it to the executive committee. Perhaps if you are in a more junior position and your boss has not bought into it, that might be trickier. But even then, using concrete evidence is punchy in showing the business case for EBHR.*
- Q How do you avoid getting lost in the research phase and deciding you have enough data?**
A *We had a deadline. That was effective. But themes were also starting to emerge even in the early evidence gathering stage, helping us feel comfortable enough to move on. Looking at multiple different sources of evidence helped us reach this point.*
- Q After determining your business case, making key findings on research and working out what needs to be done, what were the next steps you took in terms of actually implementing interventions?**
A *In each priority area we gave ourselves a number of associated measures to determine whether it had been successful. It is quite difficult to track business improvements back to specific interventions you've made – it's a work in progress – but with each piece of work we were doing we were really thinking about how we would measure the success of them.*



EVIDENCE-BASED HR: A NEW PARADIGM

CASE STUDY QUICKFIRE EBHR AT THALES



DAVE HODGES is a Strategic HR Business Partner for the Thales Group – working in an environment of mega-size infrastructure programmes that combine the innovation and low build numbers of F1 with the size and scale of the Millennium Dome. A self-described people geek with a curious interest in why people behave as they do in the corporate environment. Dave came into HR from the Talent Acquisition specialism and has spent seven years learning and refining what he would now call an ‘evidence-based approach to HR’.

SLIDES

Dave Hodges, Strategic HR Business Partner for **Thales Group**, described a fast EBHR process which was carried out over a number of weeks. Thales Group builds once-in-a-generation technology projects, often acting as a government contractor on jobs such as new signalling systems on the London Underground or tech on the UK’s new aircraft carrier HMS Queen Elizabeth.

Retention is key. When governments change their plans on infrastructure projects, that can be demotivating for people working on them at major contractors. If people then start to leave, *“you end up on the front page of the news”*, meaning it is crucial to be able to hold onto people.

Financial incentives and bonus schemes play a major part in retention for Thales. The EBHR process was to appraise the effectiveness and scope of these incentives. Hodges and his team carried out the process over four weeks, seeking to answer the following questions over four blocks of time:

- 9th May workshop:** What is the question we are answering? (For example: do financial retention payments for key individuals reduce risk on programmes?)
- Three weeks of individual research:** What data/sources of evidence can be used to answer this question?
- 23rd May workshop:** What is the strength and trustworthiness of this data? And what is all the evidence telling us and what is it not telling us?
- Face-to-face 7th June workshop:** Based on the evidence, what is the most effective solution and how might it be applicable to our context? Moreover, how do we assess the effectiveness and impact of our intervention to answer our original question?

As the process went on, it became clear that the timetable needed to be altered, so the Thales team put extra sessions in. This is a key part of an EBHR process, says Hodges, to be comfortable adapting and changing plans as the inquiry goes on.

The second stage involved gathering evidence from four sources: the organisation, external practitioners, stakeholders and scientific literature. This took roughly one-and-a-half days of total work over several weeks, and was not designed as a granular, detailed investigation, but as a fast-turnaround approach which built on existing knowledge within the HR function.

Stage three was aggregating the evidence from stage two. This partly involved assessing the trustworthiness and relevance of the various pieces of evidence that had been collected, and also working to determine what it was actually telling them. The findings included:

Being on multiple programmes at one time can provide balance of one project ending whilst others are in different phases.

- Some people live for integration and validation whilst others don’t.
- Thales employees tend to go from one incentive to another.
- Some people found insufficient room for long term succession.
- Financial payments have around a 1 in 5 effect on retention.

The final stage concluded that financial incentives were somewhat effective, but that they were extrinsic in nature. Intrinsic motivation (factors like autonomy) matters just as much if not more, and it leads to 16% overall better performance, 125% less burnout, 32% more commitment to their organisation and 46% more satisfaction.

Thales implemented three recommendations:

- 1 Manage financial incentive retention schemes centrally so as to collect more data on how effective they are.
- 2 Standardise milestones and timings of payments.
- 3 Carry out an additional investigation into wider motivational health of the team.

Hodges said not all EBHR programmes need to be meticulous – rather, they can seek to address smaller issues with simple solutions, over a short amount of time. He summarised: *“It was a sprint, it was fast and it started to take us in the right direction.”*





EVIDENCE-BASED HR: A NEW PARADIGM



Q How did you get acceptance of an EBHR approach with superiors?

A Start small. We can only explicitly call it EBHR if we know what the problem is. So you need to articulate the problem really well, find four sources of evidence, and count your solution back to all of that. It's just as much about the mindset as it is about the process.

Q In your fast research process, how did you know where the limits of the EBHR procedure should be?

A The really simple question is do I know more than I did when I started, and is that sufficient to move the needle a little bit? We're not going to change the entire world of engagement and motivational programmes with one process, but we were able to make smaller changes. That also means it is less risky. It doesn't matter as much if a small process fails, but the effects if it succeeds can really make a difference.

Q How did you make sure your evidence was coming from a wide enough range of sources to reflect what was happening in your organisation?

A Our process didn't allow that sort of range, so instead we accepted and maintained awareness of the limitations of our evidence. The scientific data on our process mainly came from the education industry, which is not fully representative of Thales. However, if we acknowledge its limitations, we can still look at that information and then decide how it might apply to us.



Q&A



SHIOBHÁN SHERIDAN is the FCA's Chief People Officer where she works with the Board, Executive Committee and colleagues to ensure strategies, frameworks, technology and workforce insight to enable long-term sustainable organisational performance through people. Previously Siobhán was Civilian HR Director for the Ministry of Defence where she was responsible for 57,000 Civil Servants. She worked in the charity sector as the Director of People and Organisational Development for the NSPCC. Siobhán was awarded a CBE for services to Defence in 2020 and is a Chartered Companion of the CIPD (CCIPD). She holds a Master's in Coaching and Mentoring and a Master's in Organisational Change.

Q You were an early adopter of EBHR. What did you see in it that others didn't?

A I was at a student conference about EBHR, and I realised that I agreed with the principles. Namely, that if we're going to improve, it is important to understand that what we've done before could have been better. And when you know better, do better again.

Q How do you go about creating an environment where these processes can happen?

A Organisations can get mired down and just not agree on basic language from the start. They could mean different things by the word 'strategy,' for instance. In every environment I've worked in, whether it be the private sector, public sector or nonprofit sector, bringing in someone from the outside can really help your team learn together as one. That way the team can support each other and even challenge me as Chief People Officer in that same language. That's critically important, so that everyone is being educated.

Q You've described EBHR as a human game. Why is the human element so central to you?

A Often in organisations, conversations about people end up happening in the language of statistics. But sometimes, it is too easy for us to separate ourselves from the human beings that are participating in our endeavour. Evidence-based practice deliberately incorporates the opinions of stakeholders; it talks about us as practitioners, so that values our professional experience and expertise. EBHR treats both of these as evidence, and validates both of those things. In that sense, evidence is a great way to humanise what we do.



EVIDENCE-BASED HR: A NEW PARADIGM

★ NEXT STEPS

Every HR function has the opportunity to do more EBHR, even the ones who already do it well. Rob Briner pointed to **CRF's upcoming audit tool**, launching later this year, which can help practitioners improve their capabilities by identifying which bits of EBHR they do well and what they need to work on.

The purpose of the audit is to evaluate:

- 1 Where the team is now in relation to EBHR behaviours in order to identify how the function can improve its evidence-based capabilities.
- 2 Where your main HR initiatives are in relation to the EBHR Model in order to identify which initiatives are more or less likely to be helping the business, which ones you need to find out more about, and which ones you can likely stop doing.
- 3 Can be done on your own within the team or we can come and facilitate.

! CONCLUSION

This one-day event presented CRF's new report: [Evidence-Based HR: A New Paradigm](#), along with a number of associated practical models, tools and guides to help practitioners use EBHR more frequently. The next steps in the project will include an **audit tool** and a [CRF Learning online short course in EBHR in the coming months](#). If you would like further information or would like support in developing EBHR in your organisation, please contact rob@crforum.co.uk.

crf UPCOMING EVENTS

-  **EVENT WITH RESEARCH**
[Reskilling for Sustainable Growth](#)
-  **21st March, 9.00 GMT | In-Person, London**
-  **7th February, 14.00 GMT | Online**

Register →

FURTHER READING

- CRF. 2024. *Evidence-Based HR: A New Paradigm*. Research Report. <https://www.crforum.co.uk/research-and-resources/research-evidence-based-hr-a-new-paradigm>
- CRF. 2024. *The EBHR Toolkit*. <https://www.crforum.co.uk/research-and-resources/the-ebhr-toolkit>
- CRF. 2023. *Strong Foundations: Evidence-Based HR*. Research Report. <https://www.crforum.co.uk/research-and-resources/research-strong-foundations-evidence-based-hr>



PRE-EVENT MASTERCLASS:
From Anecdote to Intelligence-led: Mastering Data and Insights in HR Leadership

Should you have been unable to attend the CRF Partner Masterclass hosted by [ManpowerGroup Talent Solutions](#) on the morning of the event or would like to access the materials, please contact [Mette Stern](#), CRF Partner Engagement Manager.