

COMMENTARY

## We need to find out where small businesses find information first

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We appreciate the concern expressed in the focal article by Zhou et al. (2024) on the I-O psychology scientist–practitioner gap in small business. The common public and larger organizations that I-O psychologists study are very different than small businesses. What information they need and in what format that information would be best delivered may differ significantly. Although we as researchers may think it is interesting to see how small business owners react to journal articles, the authors of this commentary do not believe that this should be our first step in figuring out what gap exists and how to fill it. At the outset, we must state that we find it unlikely most small businesses or their leaders have access to journal articles, let alone the required training to understand articles with the level of complexity to draw useful conclusions from them.

Even among those trained in I-O psychology, it has been found that few in practice use actual journal articles; rather they instead prefer to use trade articles or vendor provided articles and other content (Islam et al., 2018). In terms of usefulness, research has found that I-O psychologists in applied settings find most relevant to their work not the top research–focused journal but rather more applied focused journals such as this journal and *The Industrial Organizational Psychologist* (Highhouse et al., 2020). And worth noting is that this journal is “free” with membership in SIOP, whereas *The Industrial Organizational Psychologist* is an open access publication, and hence much more accessible. Thus, the journals provide easy access and an applied focus, something that makes them accessible in multiple uses of the term to those in practice.

This commentary argues that our needed first step to understand how to reduce the scientist–practitioner gap in small business is to survey and find out where small business owners currently get information. This kind of study will allow us to figure out what formats and arenas we need our science to be present in order to reach this particular sector. Although we cannot know for sure where small business owners are getting information currently without empirical data, we suggest a few venues that small business owners may be gaining information on business practice, such as, blogs, podcasts, and short video formats. We cannot reach small business owners if we are not in the arenas they go to find information.

### Finding out what small business owners currently use

This academic–practitioner gap is not unique to I-O psychology but is instead found across the spectrum of disciplines and fields, as distinct as business administration, medicine, communication, and even biology. Thus, other fields have examined questions of what those in their particular practice use. For instance, a study (Fabian et al., 2019) discussed the various information sources used by practitioners in the field of nature conservancy. Similar to what Zhou et al., mentioned, Fabian et al. (2019) found that practitioners find journal articles or textbooks to be not useful

sources of information. They found that short and easily digestible articles written for a general audience were deemed more useful. That sort of information could perhaps be easily presented via means of podcasts or blog posts.

Similarly, Tapp (2005) bemoans that marketing practitioners and professionals get absolutely no value from complex and inscrutable academic journal articles, and would instead benefit from something that is truly helpful and useful to their practice. Similar studies exist that explore and expound on similar practitioner–academic gaps in other fields such as medicine, clinical psychology, and even higher education.

For small businesses in particular, such research needs to be conducted. We'd suggest three major aspects that need to be surveyed.

First, what are the current challenges small businesses see a need for help with? We need to understand what kind of information is needed by small businesses. The particular needs for small businesses on major areas like recruitment, selection, assessment, and performance may be different than large organizations. With a stronger understanding of what these needs are, we can better identify current I-O psychology research that is relevant and plan future research projects.

Second, we need to understand where small business owners currently go for information. Is it other business owners? The chamber of commerce? Online groups? Social media videos? Blogs? Podcasts? Who we do outreach to and how we do so should be impacted by what small businesses currently do. It will be much easier to build a relationship and trust when we are providing information through currently trusted sources of information to small business owners.

Third, we need to collect data on specific, exact sources used. The research suggested in the paragraph above can get us categories of where small businesses go, but for a particular outreach effort we may want to connect with specific groups. Is there a podcast that is listened to by many small business owners? Appearances by I-O psychologists on the podcast may be a great way to reach small business owners. We may find willing partners for our research when we understand what small business owners want and who they get information from currently.

Specific information on who small business owners go to now could also inform us on how to structure our own outreach efforts. If small business owners listen to podcasts, what are the general characteristics of those podcasts? This could be length, style, format, where they stream, and so forth. With such information, I-O psychologists could tailor new content to fit the existing preferences of small business owners.

We see these three areas as needed foundational areas of knowledge on small business owners. There are certainly other areas that may be of interest and value over time. This especially could be true related to how these might differ based on factors such as industry, country context, and the like for a small business.

### **Some potential alternatives to having small business owners read top-tier academic journals**

Although we do not yet have empirical data on where small business owners go for data, existing research in other fields offers some potentially valuable perspective. A plethora of studies across disciplines and fields have found practitioners simply do not read academic journals, at least not the highly complex and technical kinds. In management for instance, one could reasonably argue that more practitioners read outlets like *Harvard Business Review* or *MIT Sloan Review* rather than *Administrative Science Quarterly* or the *Academy of Management Journal*. The reason is simply a matter of accessibility! An individual will simply not read something if they already suspect that they will not learn or understand from that source. We are confident in asserting that small business leaders or owners are not inclined to pick up an academic journal article and wade through complex statistics and heavy jargon.

Instead, we believe that a much better route would be to make the content approachable, understandable, and interesting. As we described in the previous section, we need research to determine what small businesses are currently using. However, in this section, we highlight a few tools that could be useful formats for presenting research information in an approachable, understandable and interesting manner.

Podcasts could be a valuable way to get I-O research knowledge across to practitioners (e.g. Conroy & Kidd, 2023; Kidd, 2012). Podcasts can allow for discussion of research topics in an understandable way with examples. The discussions could be tailored to a small business audience and perhaps even have small business owners as hosts or guests.

For an example in a related field to I-O psychology, leadership studies, the International Leadership Association runs a popular podcast series called Phronesis (<https://www.scottjallen.net/podcast>), which is hosted by Dr. Scott J. Allen (Allen, 2020–present). In this podcast, Dr. Allen interviews guests, many of whom are renowned academics who publish in top academic journals. On the podcast, they discuss their ideas and findings in easy to understand language. The podcast tries to take these research ideas and provide to listeners practical tips that can be applied in their own leadership (Allen, 2020–present). Thus, this kind of format could be of help to leaders in learning about current leadership research. This podcast has a big reach and a large global audience.

A similar podcast series focusing on I-O psychology topics and findings would work wonders for small business leaders to be able to gather actual usable information. Instead of asking small business owners and leaders to go read academic papers, why not have them listen to podcasts to get the same message? The goal is to get them to learn and be able to apply the knowledge to help their own businesses, and podcasts can be great ways to do so.

Another potential option is to have short but impactful video clips that would have I-O psychology scholars talk about how their research findings would be useful or helpful to small business owners and leaders. Some organizations have started this endeavor, albeit not specifically targeted to small businesses. For example, the Academy of Management has a series of YouTube videos (<https://www.youtube.com/@AcademyOfManagement>). The viewer statistics for these videos however, do not however look very Spielbergish; perhaps, I-O psychology-research-based videos ought to try and make their videos more appealing. We are sure that the psychology behind binging on Instagram or Facebook Reels (e.g. Lambert et al., 2023) could be put to good use to make these I-O psychology research videos more appealing to their prospective small-business owner viewership. The videos could also be tied more directly to small business needs, which might help to attract relevant viewers.

Blogs represent another major online way of conveying information. Blogs could feature author interviews, where the arcane methodologies and complex language found in most journal articles could perhaps be distilled down and made a lot more comprehensible. And of course, these blogs could also just be third-party takes on research findings and be delivered in a way that aids complete comprehension by the reader.

The site ScienceForWork (<https://scienceforwork.com/>) represents an important current blog initiative that could be a model for disseminating relevant research to small businesses. ScienceForWork (2024) offers summaries of journal articles in management and I-O psychology that focus on the key takeaways for managers. This initiative is covering I-O psychology research and in part is being done by I-O psychologists, with one example being a post by Brown (2023) related to candidate selection methods. A similar kind of initiative could be beneficial for small businesses. We would need to make sure it is research that fits their needs that is summarized.

## Conclusion

In this commentary, we have basically posited that we cannot expect small-business owners and leaders to start reading, let alone relishing, our academic scholarly journals. So instead, we need to

deliver the information in a way and in modes that small business owners will actually use and benefit from. Conducting a series of surveys would be a good start to figuring out who small businesses go to currently for information and what information they need. We then offered some suggestions of formats that might be appealing to small business owners, including podcasts, short video clips, and blogs. All of this is for the goal of finding a good way to transfer scholarly knowledge to small business practitioners so that the latter group truly benefit from it.

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