Putting Evidence in Its Place: A Means Not an End

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We agree with Briner and Rousseau (2011) that industrial–organizational (I–O) practice should use the best possible evidence and that empirical research findings should be more readily available. However, these claims do not address what for us are the real issues the authors raise: (a) What counts as ''evidence''? (b) what does it mean to say that practice is ''evidence-based''? and (c) what beyond evidence is needed?

First, we applaud their expanded view of what should count as evidence, but the authors' proposed evidence-based practice seems unrealistic. Throughout their article is the assumption that evidence *dictates* practice. If we knew the research, they seem to say, and if we judiciously incorporated with it evidence drawn from the other three quadrants in their model, we would have the evidence and we would know what to do. They describe a practice where decisions follow necessarily from the evidence, with the task of the practitioner ultimately reduced to finding the evidence and following its dictates. In short, the authors describe good evidence as if it were both a necessary and sufficient condition of good practice.

We agree that good evidence is necessary for good practice but disagree that it is sufficient. In I–O practice, evidence *supports* decisions but does not dictate them; practice decisions are rarely if ever clear-cut and I–O practitioners seldom if ever dictate courses of action to clients. Instead, practitioners provide judgment-based recommendations made amid uncertainty and subject to intense debate and challenge. The role of evidence is to provide the justification for claims that solutions will be effective or that courses of action should be taken. Accordingly, a critical property of evidence in applied settings is its power to convince, persuade, or influence. What warrants decisions under these conditions—and what we believe already characterizes effective I–O practice—is not only good evidence but good *argument*. Evidence is a part of an argument but clearly not the whole thing. We believe that I–O practice would benefit from promoting an argument-based practice rather than one focusing exclusively on evidence, one where I–O practitioners engage and learn in practice settings by putting together their strongest cases for action and subjecting them to open debate and challenge.

Second, the authors omit performance indicators (e.g., market share or repeat business) from the seven criteria they use to determine whether the I–O field is evidence based and do not describe how the quality and value of what practitioners deliver will improve because of meeting

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those criteria. These omissions suggest that the authors believe the connection between being evidence based and being effective is self-evident. We instead believe that the connection is uncertain, as evidenced by the current debate in the field. Were its advocates to present strong evidence for the practical significance of the proposed evidence-based practice, the debate would end. In contrast, we believe it is self-evident that practitioners who make compelling arguments, cases for action that focus necessarily on the quality and value of results, are more successful than those who would focus primarily on the nature and quality of the evidence they use. In short, the best I–O practice is already argument based, and an argument-based perspective on practice builds in an explicit focus on the quality and value it delivers. Following are some possible outcomes from actively promoting argument-based practice in the I–O field.

First, a focus on creating stronger cases for action could increase the value the field places on achieving high-impact results in practice settings. While evaluating I–O practice mostly in terms of the amount and quality of scholarly research it draws on is consistent with a core value of due diligence in applied science, it may encourage putting process, sources, and methods above delivering results. We must be rigorous but in the service of creating tangible value.

Second, driven by the need to create value, I–O practitioners would seek knowledge and skills beyond those currently offered or promoted in our professional development programs. After all, when framing problems, developing solutions, and advocating for solution utility and value, more good evidence is better than less. When used to justify critical decisions and actions, it is the quality, value, and impact of evidence that matters most, not its source or pedigree. In an argument-based practice, practitioners are not compelled to use only what the field offers but can draw from other disciplines such as business, engineering, or counseling psychology.

Third, empowered by complementary knowledge and skills, I–O practitioners would become more competitive. I–O work occurs in diverse technical and non-technical contexts that can require developing arguments for different audiences. Armed with additional conceptual and technical tools and with a code of ethics and professional standards guiding their application, I–O practitioners would become fluent in the language of business and sociopolitical reality and in the rules of discourse and foundational knowledge (e.g., economics) needed to engage in solving the complex problems found in these contexts (van Eemeren & Grootendorst, 1984). In our experience, as work in applied contexts becomes more complex and critically important to clients, problem parameters quickly expand beyond the purely technical. Unlike predominately technical work where issues of technical quality can matter almost exclusively, most client work requires routinely addressing issues in "spheres of argument" (Goodnight, 1982) that are not the exclusive concern of technical experts, such as the business and sociopolitical domains. Accordingly, clients expect that evidence will support claims for the value, utility, and level of organizational support of recommended decisions and actions. This expectation is especially true for I–O practitioners in the role of authoritative expert or trusted advisor to management. In an argument-based practice, cases for action explicitly reflect and address the needs of audiences concerned with the business, political, and other contextual implications of practitioner work.

Fourth, combining integrity and rigor with delivering effective solutions in the most complex settings, I–O practice would largely reflect the scientist–practitioner ideal. This already characterizes most senior I–O practitioners and top consultants. Thus, rather than looking to other fields such as medicine, nursing, or public policy to guide our practices, we would propose obtaining guidance from the practices of our own most senior and successful practitioners. After all, they continue to translate I–O scholarly research into the products and services of an expanding base of

multibillion dollar companies serving organizations worldwide.

An Argument Culture of Practice

The capability to make compelling appeals across a variety of contexts and with a variety of people leads to success in almost any endeavor. I–O practitioners already do so within their field. For example, Zarefsky (2009) describes an *argument culture* that in almost every respect reflects the values, practices, and standards of our very best scientist–practitioners and the rules of discourse and quality of engagement within our field (e.g., subjecting cases for action to public scrutiny; providing evidence, not asserting ''proof''). Note that an argument culture as proposed here is not one characterized by insensitive, impatient people who whine, bicker, complain, and quarrel. Instead, it is a cooperative enterprise, one that promotes processes wherein people seek to warrant their own beliefs and, through exchanging reasons with others, to influence their thoughts and actions and achieve new understandings. What we need is a way to apply these principles and practices with people and in contexts external to our field. The theoretical and practice literatures in the interdisciplinary field of argumentation (e.g., pragma-dialectics; van Eemeren & Grootendorst, 1984) can provide a basis for evolving this practice.

Conclusion

An argument-based practice, drawing as it would on the strong argument culture of I–O psychology and reflecting the common practice of our most accomplished practitioners, can promote the practice improvement goals of those advocating evidence-based practice. In addition, it can help overcome the real or perceived gap between academic research and real-world practice, promote practice quality and value, and encourage practitioners to empower themselves with the interdisciplinary and communication tools they need for success in complex, dynamic, and largely social contexts. From an argument-based perspective, barriers to rigor and quality practice seem eminently tractable: There may be a lack of client demand for evidence-based practice, outrageous politics, and bullish competitors, but the practitioners we envision would deliver persuasive cases for action, manage or even capitalize on the political environment to gain an edge, and prevail convincingly over the competition.

Finally, we reiterate our view that the role of evidence should be to provide the justification for claims that solutions will be effective and for taking specific courses of action. In doing so, we put evidence in its proper place, a place where it will do the most good: as a means and not an end.

References

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