

Three words that HR professionals should live by

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My wife works in the medical field. Throughout her training, she was and is constantly reminded of one of the core principles of how she should approach her work. Three simple words. Failure to follow these words can put patients' well-being at greater risk and can open individuals up to ethical and legal challenges in their decision-making. The three words are *evidence-based practice*.

Similarly, HR professionals have a duty to make the best decisions for the business and for employee well-being. Failure to follow the evidence-based practice in HR will lead to erroneous decisions that will impact business performance in the long-run, and can create a more challenging environment for employees to perform at their best and most productive.

What is evidence-based practice?

Evidence-based practice (or EBP) originated in medicine and first entered the vocabulary in the early 1990s. Its medical definition is often known as the *three-legged stool*. Clinical decisions should be made based on:

- the best available research evidence on whether and why a treatment works
- clinical judgment and experience to rapidly identify each patient's unique health state and diagnosis and the individual risks and benefits of potential interventions
- client preferences and values

The idea of EBP quickly moved into other fields, and perhaps the closest clinical field to HR, that of psychology, adopted this definition: *the integration of the best available research with clinical expertise in the context of patient characteristics, culture, and preferences*.

Transferring these general principles into the Human Resources space, there are really two key thrusts to EBP in HR (and this is my personal definition):

1. Determining actions based on best available research and sound methodology
2. Applying actions sensibly in the context of organizational culture, norms, and preferences

Failure to follow any one of these two principles is the failure of the EBP period, either because the wrong action was implemented or the right action was implemented the wrong way. I want to spend some time in this article talking about both elements of my definition of EBP and how to follow it in the workplace.

Following best available research and sound methodology

In any definition of EBP, this always comes first - you can't follow evidence-based practice if you don't have evidence. Yet this is the part where I see so many organizations fail. Incorporate environments, several dynamics act as a block to professionals consulting the best available research and applying the sound methodology, including:

- **Lack of available expertise** in the organization, often driven by volume hiring of general HR professionals focused on service provision, and no substantive hiring of content experts in fields like organization theory, analytics, or organizational psychology.
- **A hypothesis-driven culture**, which is the opposite of an evidence-based culture. In a hypothesis-driven culture, leaders drive decision-making around ingoing beliefs or instincts, expecting validation of them and putting experts under pressure to only select evidence that supports these beliefs. In an evidence-based culture, leaders should ask open questions and allow professionals the freedom to determine the best answer to those questions based on the body of knowledge available.
- **Lack of structure** to the workflow around strategic research and analytics. Substantial questions deserve a well-structured and organized plan to answer them, especially if a multi-disciplinary approach is required. Particularly lacking is a specific breed of professional who has a strategic understanding of the business, who is driven by evidence-based principles, and who can work with content domain experts, be it in analytics, psychology, labour economics, or whatever, to build a well studied and researched perspective.

Addressing these blocks can only be done from the top. It is the responsibility of the CHRO to establish an evidence-based culture in their function, to bring on board the right individuals to make that happen, and to model behaviours that illustrate an evidence-based approach in their day-to-day decision-making.

Applying actions sensibly

The need to apply actions sensibly is not coded language for ignoring those actions or giving them up in favour of something easier or more liked by the rest of the business. It is meant as an acknowledgement that *theoretical solutions need practical implementation*.

Research that has been done external to the organization, however compelling, needs careful critiquing in order to understand the differences in context and the implications that have for implementation. Typical considerations include:

- The size of the organization on which the research was done or the action was taken - for example, highly personalized approaches in small organizations may not be scalable.
- The culture and values of the organization - for example, highly hierarchical cultures like the military may make certain actions easier to take.
- The timescale of the actions - some environments allow for more rapid change than others.

The evidence-based leader will approach this by laying out clearly the non-negotiable actions that need to be taken based on the research and assembling a representative group of people from the business to discuss the most pragmatic ways of taking those actions.

Evidence-based practice is key to the continued development and professionalization of HR, and a requirement for HR functions to have a greater say in organizational development. How well do you feel your organization follows evidence-based practice in its decision-making?

The post "Three words that HR professionals should live by" was first published by Keith McNulty here <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/three-words-hr-professionals-should-live-keith-mcnulty/>

About Keith McNulty

I lead McKinsey's internal People Analytics and Measurement function. Originally I was a Pure Mathematician, then I became a Psychometrician. I am passionate about applying the rigour of both those disciplines to complex people questions. I'm also a coding geek and a massive fan of Japanese RPGs.

All opinions expressed are my own and not to be associated with my employer or any other organization I am connected with.

