

# WORLDS APART: A FOCUS ON THE “GREAT DIVIDE” WITHIN THE HRM SCHOLAR-PRACTITIONER COMMUNITY

**Teresa A. Daniel, J.D., M.A.**

2979 Terrace Lane  
Ashland, KY 41102 USA

## ABSTRACT

There is a “knowledge gap” between academic researchers and practitioners. Managers frequently experience the delivery of academic research as relatively incomprehensible and trailing practice, rather than leading it. Conversely, academic researchers are disinclined to seek inspiration for new research ideas from the real-world problems experienced by practitioners. The problem may not be what research is actually conducted by academics, but rather how little the research is actually used by practitioners. This gap can partially be explained by the very different cultures and systems within which each group operates; however, when research that is useful does not make its way into mainstream practice in a timely fashion, everyone loses. This paper explores possible ways to improve knowledge transfer and bridge the current gap that currently exists between individuals who live and work within these two distinct cultural and reward systems.

Keywords: Academic Research, Practitioners, Knowledge Gap, Knowledge Transfer

## A. Introduction to the Problem

In Human Resources Management (herein “HRM”), as in all disciplines where separate groups of researchers and practitioners co-exist, there is what has been referred to as a “divide” between academics and practitioners. This divide, often viewed as a “failure to communicate”, occurs because academics and practitioners operate within different systems which have uniquely different cultures and reward mechanisms which do not encourage collaboration or partnering.

Raynes, Bartunek & Daft (2001) describe the situation as a “knowledge gap” between academics and practitioners, suggesting that academics present information in a way that is “relatively incomprehensible to managers”. They also suggest that managers frequently experience the delivery of academic research as *trailing* practice, rather than *leading* it. On a more positive note, however, they find that “a preponderance of the evidence suggests that collaborations between researchers and practitioners increase research productivity and, in some cases, quality as well” (Raynes, Bartunek & Daft, 2001, p. 343).

Starkey and Madan (2001) argue that management research is often irrelevant to practice, and that it is typically discipline-based and frequently more concerned about theory than about practice. Instead, they advocate approaches to research that are less concerned about theory development, but that involve academics and practitioners collaborating to address problems defined within specific and localized contexts.

Anecdotally and throughout the literature, it is reported that academics and researchers are frequently unaware of and often pay little attention to issues of real concern to practitioners. Conversely, practitioners are often unaware of the research and contributions of academics as they do their work. In my view, both groups have much to gain by listening to—and acting on—the best thinking offered by the other, and also much to lose by failing to collaborate on key issues facing the HRM profession.

## **Worlds Apart: A Focus on the “Great Divide” by Teresa A. Daniel**

The reference to the “divide” between academic researchers and practitioners results from the fact that there is a substantial body of evidence that supports the perception that when practitioners develop management policies and practices, they are disinclined to use the findings of academic researchers. In the same way, academics are unlikely to seek inspiration for new research ideas from the real-world problems being experienced by practitioners at work.

The “disconnect” between these two communities is not a small one. There is research that documents how removed actual organizational decision-making is from what is known from actual research findings. Rynes, Brown and Colbert (2002) report seven commonly-held beliefs in HRM practices that have been shown in academic research to be entirely false (e.g. companies that screen job applicants for values have higher performance than those that screen for intelligence, integrity tests do not work well in practice because so many people lie on them, etc.). Clearly, each group has had a limited impact on each other’s thinking, writing and research orientation.

This issue is further complicated by the increasing sophistication in the technology of research methods. This has resulted in less utility for practical problem-solving in organizations (Rynes, Bartunek & Daft, 2001). Complicated research is not likely to be read by practitioners. Practitioners typically view academic texts, journals and conferences as unworthy of their time. Typically, they are already doing the best they can to handle the issues that they must face daily, and they generally do not have the time to try to extrapolate what the research actually means to them in practice. The problem may be not *what research is actually done* by academics, but rather *how little the research is actually used* by practitioners (Buchanan and Wan, 2005).

One of the reasons offered for this divide between academics and practitioners is that they operate from fundamentally different frames of reference— with very different values, ideologies and styles of decision-making. The studies make it clear that the gap is more than a lack of knowledge of each other’s knowledge base or approach to problems. Two very different cultures exist (Bunker, Alban and Lewicki, 2004, p. 405) that represent very different systems from which the members of each group operate. As a result, there are significant differences in the goals of each community, which impede any serious utilization of relevant research (Campbell, Daft & Hulin, 1982, as cited in Rynes, Bartunek & Daft, 2001).

Buchanan and Wan ((2005) investigated what sources of information and knowledge senior executives use in making key decisions. Shockingly, but not surprising, they found that executives considered academic sources of information “almost totally useless” (p. 39) and recommended that academics serious about disseminating their research to practitioners should “think outside their usual mechanisms or vehicles of delivery” (p. 43).

Rynes, Bartunek & Daft (2001) suggest that many existing claims about this great divide are based on anecdotal findings, rather than on empirical evidence. For example, academics often seem to be deeply split about the value of research collaboration with practitioners with respect to the advancement of science. Their chief worry seems to be that the collaboration will mean that only narrow, short-term, or commercially-profitable projects will be supported.

They also have concerns that information-sharing, which is an essential part of academic research, may be restricted because of “commercial sensitivity”. However, there is very little empirical evidence to confirm these fears. In fact, Rynes, McNatt & Bretz (1999) have found that practitioners did not often place limits on scientific inquiry or limits on the dissemination of knowledge among organizational scientists.

### **B. Possible Ways to Improve Knowledge Transfer**

## Worlds Apart: A Focus on the “Great Divide” by Teresa A. Daniel

The literature confirms that there is a lack of frequent collaboration between academics and practitioners; however, knowledge transfer *can* successfully occur between the practitioner and research communities. Looking beyond HRM to the biological sciences as a model, the most successful academic biological researchers tend to have the highest interaction levels with practitioners (Cohen et al, 1998, as cited in Rynes, Bartunek & Daft, 2001), so clearly there are ways to improve the transfer of knowledge between these diverse communities.

Ospina, Godsoe & Schall (2001) suggest a promising strategy which they refer to as “co-production”—meaning the “joint inquiry work of practitioners and scholars, which requires the mutual acceptance of each other’s points of reference and appreciation of what each party brings to the inquiry” (p. 3). The point of co-production is to build on the expertise of both practitioners and scholars without privileging one set of experiences or skills over the other. As an example, they suggest that one outcome of this kind of work is practice-grounded research—research which is based on data that comes directly from practice and yields findings that can inform practice.

Critical to making co-production work, however, is that scholars must make a commitment to doing research that is based on the needs of practitioners, and they must agree to organize the results so that they are relevant to and inform practice. Conversely, practitioners must suspend any preconceptions about academic research that they may have and trust that there is a way of doing research differently, and they must have faith in their own ability to do research (Ospina, et al., p. 3).

The major challenge of implementing a co-production strategy to bridge the gap between theory and practice is that both practitioners and scholars must build enough trust that they can work together as partners. Given the gap between theory and practice and the radically different experiences of practitioners and scholars, and even wildly divergent worldviews, can make trust-building difficult at best. Another challenge is that practitioners are usually very busy people and may have little time (or energy) for research, feeling instead that research is “something that experts do” (Ospina, Godsoe & Schall, p. 8).

Mohrman, Gibson and Mohrman (2001) tested a model for conducting useful research to practitioners. They used ten different companies and reported evidence to suggest that strong collaborative processes in research between researchers and practitioners enhance the perceived usefulness of the results.

Offerman and Spiros (2001) reported differences in value placed on empirical knowledge sources between academics and practitioners in the area of team development. Practitioners suggested that the best way researchers could improve the practice of team development was to include more of an applied focus in their research. They based their recommendation on the fact that most of the published research on teams remains “unread, unappreciated, and not used to actually guide organizations”.

Amabile et al. (2001) conducted a single-case study of an innovation research group comprised of practitioners and academic researchers. They found that incompatible problem-solving styles tended to lead to unproductive conflict in the research group. These different styles were caused by the cultural differences between the academics and practitioner community. The use of well-planned and frequent meetings helped the collaborative processes and the success of the project, with the most significant impact on success being the conflict resolution processes observed in the research group.

Spencer (2001) explored the relative contributions of academic and corporate research to subsequent research and development activities in one industry in both Japan and the United States. In Japan, university research was found to be much less influential than

## **Worlds Apart: A Focus on the “Great Divide” by Teresa A. Daniel**

corporate research. However, in the United States, the difference in relevance between university research and corporate research was not significant. One of the conclusions from her study is that academics who strive to make their research relevant to firms should target journals that frequently publish advances in corporate research.

With respect to HRM, academic researchers try to publish their research in top-tier journals that are refereed internationally. This requirement to “publish or perish” provides significant motivation for academics, given the tenure and promotion requirements, as well as the expectations, of most universities. Academic researchers prefer to attend academic conferences to present their research results rather than practitioner-oriented conferences. Their reasoning is that the research carries more weight in their own peer network and academic community when presented in an academic arena.

On the other hand, practitioners tend to find academic conferences somewhat tedious and less relevant than their own practitioner-oriented conferences. In addition, much of what is presented at academic conferences, the style of presentation (usually individuals literally reading their papers word for word, in this author’s experience), and the typically limited time for any real dialogue or interaction, is often not seen as particularly relevant or immediately useful to the practitioner.

A recent example of the apparent inability of practitioners and academic research to actually communicate with each other occurs with respect to the issue of recruitment and selection—a very significant area of HRM research and practice. Despite the fact that personnel selection has been one of the most researched areas of organizational psychology and HRM in recent years, the evidence suggests that practitioners still do not use much of the research information. Instead, they report using selection devices that are not particularly valid (Dakin and Armstrong, 1989; Taylor, Mills & O’Driscoll, 1993; Harris, Toulson and Livingston, 1996), clearly indicating that the research is not being read or used by practitioners.

### **III. Some Initial Suggestions about “Bridging the Gap”**

**A. Win-Win Projects.** Researchers have suggested a variety of ways that the “gap” between academics and practitioners might be closed. One of the most promising ways to do this is to try to identify research projects that will be of benefit to the HRM practitioner community, while at the same time be of potential benefit to academics in the international arena as well as for their promotion and tenure requirements. If academic researchers can focus on the applied aspects of a problem in collaboration with the practitioner community, then it is more likely that the research results will actually be read and used by practitioners.

**B. Cross-Community Events.** Another bridge-building approach might be created by hosting cross-community events which bring top schools, HRM practitioners and management teams together for social interaction and an opportunity for dialogue. This would allow the participants to gain an understanding of the worldviews of the other.

**C. Overlapping Communities.** Similar in intent to cross-community events, rotations and partnerships that establish concrete experiences in the other’s world might also prove to be beneficial. Given that one of the key reasons for the disconnect between these two communities is a lack of trust and the fact that they have distinctly different cultures (and motivations), opportunities to experience each other’s worlds might be one of the best ways to begin to bridge the gap that currently exists.

### **IV. Conclusions**

## Worlds Apart: A Focus on the “Great Divide” by Teresa A. Daniel

A need for the scholar and practitioner communities to “come together” is evident. Closer collaboration through more partnerships would undoubtedly result in significant benefits to both groups—practitioners would be more likely to actually use the academic research being generated in their applied settings, and scholars would have more reason to create knowledge that is actually used and respected.

The academic and practitioner divide can become a matter of life and death within the fields of medicine, biology, genetics and related life sciences. In these particular arenas, quickly validating and integrating academic research into professional practice can be critical. In the past, the lag between discovery and diffusion of an innovation could be considerable—up to 200 years with medical cures (Rynes, Bartunek and Daft, 2001). By the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it has been reported that the lag between a medical innovation and its adoption in routine practice averaged 8 – 13 years, depending on the specialty (Sackett et al, 1997).

Although the stakes are considerably higher when it comes to issues of health and healing, the lack of application and use of academic research in the area of HRM is also damaging. Our failure to embrace the best thinking available—in all fields—results in lower profits, reduced efficiency and productivity, plus increasing stress and frustration. When research that is useful does not make its way into mainstream practice in a timely fashion, everyone loses.

### REFERENCES

- Amabile, T.M., C. Patterson, J. Mueller, T. Wojcik, M.M. Odomirok, et al. (2001). Academic-Practitioner Collaboration in Management Research: A Case of Cross-Professional Collaboration. *Academy of Management Journal*, 44, pp. 418 – 431.
- Argyris, C. and D. Schon (1992). *Theory in Practice: Increasing Professional Effectiveness*. New York: Jossey Bass.
- Bentz, V.M. & Shapiro, J.J. (1998). *Mindful Inquiry in Social Research*. Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications.
- Bolton, M.J. and G.B. Solcis (2003). Ties That Do Not Bind: Musings on the Specious Relevance of Academic Research. *Public Administration Review* 63 (5), pp. 626 – 630.
- Buchanan, R.W. and J.Wan (2005). Broadening the Boundaries of Academic Publication Priorities. In Purchase, S. (Ed. ). *Proceedings of the Australian and New Zealand Marketing Academy Conference*. Fremantle: The University of Western Australia, pp. 39 – 44.
- Bunker, B.B., B.T. Alban and R.J. Lewicki (2004). Ideas in Currency and OD Practice: Has the Well Gone Dry? *The Journal of Applied Behavioral Science*, 40 (4), pp. 403 – 422.
- Dakin, S.J. and J.S. Armstrong (1989). Predicting Job Performance: A Comparison of Expert Opinion and Research Findings. *International Journal of Forecasting*, 5 (2), pp. 187 – 194.
- Damrosch, D. (2007). Trading Up with Gilgamesh. *The Chronicle Review*. Accessed at <http://chronicle.com/free/v53/i27/27b00501.htm> on March 9, 2007.
- Flyvbjerg, B. (2001). *Making Social Science Matter: Why Social Inquiry Fails and How It Can Succeed Again*. Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press.

## Worlds Apart: A Focus on the “Great Divide” by Teresa A. Daniel

- Hambrick, D.C. (1994). What If the Academy Really Mattered? *Academy of Management Review* 19 (1), pp. 11 – 16.
- Harris, N.J., P.K. Toulson, and E.M. Livingston (1996). New Zealand Personnel Consultants and the Selection Process. *Asia Pacific Journal of Human Resources*, 34 (2), pp. 71 – 86.
- Lindblom, C. and D.K. Cohen. (1979). *Usable Knowledge: Social Science and Social Problem Solving*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Miner, J.B. (2003). The Rated Importance, Scientific Validity, and Practical Usefulness of Organizational Behavior Theories, *Academy of Management Learning and Education Journal* 2 (3), pp. 250 – 268.
- Mohrman, S.A., C.B. Gibson, and A.M. Mohrman (2001). Doing Research that is Useful to Practice: A Model and Empirical Exploration. *Academy of Management Journal*, 44 pp. 357 – 375.
- O'Connor, A. (2001). *Poverty Knowledge: Social Science, Social Policy and the Poor in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century U.S. History*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Offermann, L.R. and R.K. Spiros (2001). The Science and Practice of Team Development: Improving the Link. *The Academy of Management Journal*, 44 (2), pp. 376 – 392.
- Ospina, S., B. Godsoe, and E. Schall (2001). Co-Producing Knowledge: Practitioners and Scholars Working Together to Understand Leadership, Roundtable Presentation at the 2001 International Leadership Association Conference.
- Pfeiffer, U. and R.I. Sutton (2000). *The Knowing-Doing Gap: How Small Companies Turn Knowledge into Action*. Boston: Harvard Business School Press.
- Polyani, M. (1966). *The Tacit Dimension* (1<sup>st</sup> Edition). Garden City, NY: Doubleday.
- Rynes, S.L., K.G. Brown and A.E. Colbert (2002). Seven Common Misperceptions about Human Resource Practices: Research Findings versus Practitioner Belief. *Academy of Management Executive*, 16, pp. 92 – 102.
- Rynes, S.L. Bartunek and R. Daft (2001). Across the Great Divide: Knowledge Creation and Transfer between Practitioners and Academics. *Academy of Management Journal*, 44 (2), pp. 340 – 355.
- Rynes, S.L., D.B. McNatt and R.D. Bretz (1999). Academic Research Inside Organizations: Inputs, Processes and Outcomes. *Personnel Psychology* 52, pp. 869 – 898.
- Salipante, P. & Aram, J. (2003). Managers as knowledge generators: the nature of practitioner-scholar research in the nonprofit sector. *Nonprofit Management and Leadership*. Winter 2003, 14 (2).
- Schon, D. (1987). *Educating the Reflective Practitioner: Toward a New Design for Teaching and Learning in the Professions*. New York: Jossey Bass.
- Schon, D. (1983). *The Reflective Practitioner: How Professionals Think in Action*. New York: Basic Books.
- Spencer, J.W. (20010). How Relevant is University-Based Scientific Research to Private High-Technology Firms? A United States- Japan Comparison. *The Academy of Management Journal*, 44 (2), pp. 432 – 440.

## **Worlds Apart: A Focus on the “Great Divide” by Teresa A. Daniel**

Starkey, K, and P. Madan (2001). Bridging the Relevance Gap: Aligning Stakeholders in the Future of Management Research. *British Journal of Management*, 12 (1), pp.S3 – S26.

Taylor, P. A. Mills, and M. O’Driscoll (1993). Personnel Selection Methods Used by New Zealand Organizations and Personnel Consulting Firms. *New Zealand Journal of Psychology*, 22 (1), pp. 19 – 31.

Terpstra, D.E. & Rozell, E.J. (1997). Attitudes of practitioners in human resource management toward information from academic research. *Psychological Reports*, 8, pp. 403 – 412.

Whyte, W.F. (1991). *Social Theory for Action: How Individuals and Organizations Learn to Change*. Newbury Park: Sage.