Critical Reflection or Existential Trap: Are We Making Too Much of Scientific Rigor in a Dynamic Business World?

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Ralph Waldo Emerson is known to have said, "the greatest wonder is that we can see these trees and not wonder more." As industrial and organizational (I-O) psychologists, we often encounter this very dilemma when we examine how numerous professions rise and fall in relevance. More recently, however, we have encountered this dilemma from an existential perspective as we strive to understand the evolution of our own profession and the situational characteristics making change inevitable. We have fallen into a trap—we, too, now look at all of our practices, aiming to reconfigure the makeup of our profession while losing sight of the macrotrends affecting more than just our evolved existence. Rather than focusing on the smaller issue first, we need to start by examining the broader issues affecting it.

This is not to say that I-O psychologists should avoid concerning themselves with poor-quality and unsubstantiated approaches to solving organizational and individual employee challenges. I-O psychologists should naturally be concerned with these potential limiters of professional success. However, are we missing the forest for the trees in focusing too heavily on the negative effects of potentially bad practices on our profession—and not on how the rapid changes in the broader external environment are influencing our approach to these practices? We suggest the answer here is yes, and in doing this, we are missing opportunities to make a real impact in shaping effective talent management practices today—and, more importantly, tomorrow.

A Matter of Perspective?

Talent management practices that do not work as well as they should, or as well as they are professed to work, can certainly have a negative side. They can harm business performance, restrict employment opportunities

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for workers, and lead to on-the-job mistakes and safety issues, to name a few (Sheehan & Anderson, 2015). These risks can increase substantially as the stakes of the work being performed rise.

That said, approaching new and changing business practices (or innovations in other fields) primarily from the perspective of the dangers they pose, as opposed to opportunities for growth, advancement, or refinement of long-standing theories, limits our ability to build off these practices. Yes, some things are new and untested (and sometimes strange in the eyes of I-O). Our job is not, however, to stop the bus and say "wait, we first must test the engine and the wheels and the brakes to make sure it is all safe to go forward." For buses, that makes sense. Unfortunately, such deliberation is often not an option in today's fast-paced and highly competitive business environment. We must frequently test what we are doing *while we are doing it*.

The good news is, we already have been doing this testing for decades—with concurrent and predictive validation, for example. This is critical for situations where the potential negative impact is significant, where the need for and availability of large samples exist, and where time and resources are adequate. We just need to get better at leveraging our previous work to develop new solutions for today's challenges through a new lens.

The existence of new talent management fads and trends claiming to be the next best thing without the empirical evidence backing them up is nothing new in the business world. Rather, it can be argued that it is more of an artifact of the need for organizations and business professionals to remain competitive in an increasingly crowded global marketplace and keep up with the rapid pace of innovation and new technologies (Dyer & Shafer, 1998). There will always be problems with talent management.

We cannot put an end to bad talent management, however, any more than we can get people to stop self-diagnosing and treating medical issues with home remedies they read about on the internet. Instead of embarking on a singular mission to eradicate bad talent management, we suggest we are better off by addressing what we can do to build on these frontier and emerging practices and use their often-innovative foundations to create more effective and less costly practices. Further, we as a profession need to become better at understanding and addressing the bigger issues—the macrolevel trends within which these practices emerge.

What "Bigger Issues"?
Shifting our attention from a narrow issue like bad talent management practices to broader issues like how societal and macrolevel trends change the way we must approach these practices redirects the issue from the threats in our work itself (on which we are fixating) to the threats from outside our

work for which we need to account. Doing so provides a better vantage point of the sources of "the bad" and allows us to step away from our "professional ego." This is critical for individual and collective success in today's modern and global workforce in which societies trend away from professional structuralization toward a more self-organizing network of work roles and responsibilities (Susskind & Susskind, 2015). This new perspective also provides us with a broader view of what we can do for business, society, and our profession (Ryan & Ford, 2010). Such a perspective also better positions us for identifying how we train future I-O psychologists (and others) to perform such work.

To shift our mindset, we must refrain from looking at talent management practices—and our approach to those practices—as if they are the key to solving our profession's existential crisis. We agree with Rotolo et al. (2018) that we need to stop thinking and behaving like either scientists *or* practitioners. Rather, we should be thinking like *scientist-practitioners* in everything that we do (Kurtessis et al., 2017; Lefkowitz, 2008), regardless of what context and setting we find ourselves in.

Of key importance to this point is that no matter what we do as I-O psychologists, we must think not only in terms of evidence-based validity of inferences from and about our practices, but of their business and social contexts. This means we should continue building and applying approaches that are scientifically justified, while also increasing our focus on addressing issues of utility (i.e., *efficiency*) and human impact (Macan & Highhouse, 1994). These are not new issues for I-O psychology, but our profession continues to underassess them. Before we can focus on selective issues relevant to our profession (e.g., bad talent management practices), we must first understand the broader contributing issues, so that we can account for them when approaching the issues so salient to us. It is only through this understanding that we can begin to focus on how we, individually and as a profession, can ensure the organizations, people, and societies we serve do not struggle or fail.

Consider talent acquisition practices as an example. Emerging societal and macrolevel trends like the gig economy, reframing of the employment contract, and the impact of the war for talent have drastically changed the way we source talent today. Perhaps the problem at hand is not "bad" talent management practices, but how these societal and macrolevel trends require a radical change in the way we approach talent acquisition practices. Practices that were effective in yesterday's world of work might not be today; and if forecasters (e.g., economists, data scientists) continue to be correct in even some of their predictions, they certainly will not be effective tomorrow. Rather, tomorrow's workplace will continue to be drastically and rapidly changed by macrotrends such as innovations in technology and

artificial intelligence, shifts in the demographic composition of the workforce and global economic power, and increases in urbanization and natural resource scarcity (PricewaterhouseCooper, 2017).

What *Can* We Do?

Today's business landscape demands organizations be both judicious and effective with their time, human capital, and monetary investments. As such, organizations will continually search for and consider new ways of achieving greater return on investment despite the lack of empirical evidence or the I-O profession's endorsement. To increase I-O psychology's contributions to the business world and to the broader society, we suggest some additional ideas for each of us to consider as I-O scientist-practitioners.

We *can* continue to reinforce the effectiveness of established practices, support the emergence and expansion of new practices, and serve as the scientist-practitioners who pave the way for practices that are still on the frontier of tomorrow. To do this, we must also validate, debunk, and modify theory and practice, learning throughout the process and advocating for doing things in more effective ways. I-O psychologists must work to enable organizations to separate the "wheat from the chaff," as Rotolo et al. (2018) argue. We believe a key to doing this successfully is by assessing the effects of macrolevel trends on how organizations and people engage in talent management practices. We suggest that many of these "AIO" talent management practices have evolved out of business's and society's need to keep up with and adapt in the face of these societal and macrolevel trends we are still trying to grasp. Consider this our signal that we must evolve and adapt in alignment with the organizations, employees, and stakeholders we serve and the demands they now face.

We *can* leverage Rotolo et al.'s (2018) four-quadrant taxonomy of talent management practices as a guideline from which to identify specific, practical, efficient approaches that I-O psychologists can use in advancing the organizations, people, and societies they serve. Identifying and acting upon ways to help advance organizations within each of the four quadrants is a good foundation, but only with an understanding of how each of those microlevel practices fits in a broader macrolevel framework. It may be useful to view these practices as three continuums—(1) from idea to evidence-based, (2) from frontier to established, and (3) from low value-adding to high value-adding—rather than as four mutually exclusive quadrants. Further, focusing on one place in the continuum does not mean we should stop focusing on others (even if temporarily). We recognize the need for I-O psychology to better "keep up with the Joneses"; however, we must also be careful not to

stagnate progress in other practices that might be more or well-established already.

We *can* accept that I-O psychology is not the only profession capable of conducting sound work and research in the practices we focus on as I-O psychologists. Rather than defaulting to skepticism regarding AIO and "popularist science," we should adopt a mindset of learning and innovation. Maybe some of these practices are not perfect, but can we not instead learn what is known thus far, dig in, and find ways to make them better? Organizations are not forced to pursue only one of two mutually exclusive paths in addressing talent management issues. Management does not always oversimplify, underappreciate, or lack understanding. Other professions are not indisputably deficient in expertise compared with I-O psychology. To think that any of these statements is always the case is to miss opportunities to advance talent management practices, organizations, and, by default, the I-O psychology profession. With this in mind, now is the time to seize these opportunities and start collaborating with others.

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