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COMMENTARY

Concrete steps for bridging the scholar–practitioner divide

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The scholar–practitioner divide in industrial and organizational (I-O) psychology is something that has been of concern for quite some time, as Voss et al. (2025) clearly note. Yet, it is not enough to simply encourage scholars and practitioners to collaborate more on sharing knowledge and collaborating on research endeavors. Good intentions may not lead to actions (Ajzen, 1985). Deliberate steps need to be taken on both sides of the divide to truly make research contributions that are rigorous and more relevant to the world of work. To that end, this commentary is coauthored by a scholar who has tried to bridge the divide and work closely with practitioners throughout his career and a practitioner and executive who has actively engaged with academics on research.

Changing the mindset

The scholar–practitioner divide is fueled by different belief systems, intentions, and incentives. To simplify, academics strive for the explication of *why* something is so—empiricism. Practitioners can be characterized as searching for the practice of *how* to make something so—pragmatism. The goal of collaboration is to meld the academic rigor of getting at *why* with the practical production of *how*. Thus, the foundational step is to change mindsets. Of course, it's not as simple as just saying "change the way you are thinking," but some of the following steps may help scholars and practitioners appreciate why there are mutually beneficial reasons to work collaboratively.

Get out of your silo(es)

In academics

Most academics regularly attend scholarly conferences in their respective disciplines. For I-O psychologists, this means regular attendance at the SIOP Annual Conference, and perhaps Academy of Management. Practitioners, on the other hand, are looking for strategies, techniques, and programs that will help them provide greater benefit to clients. They are more likely to attend conferences and gatherings that are focused on successful interventions and programs. Although the SIOP conference has become more balanced in terms of the participation of academics and practitioners over its more than 40-year history, it is still possible to attend mostly or exclusively scholarly or practitioner-oriented sessions at SIOP, respectively. A good strategy is to attend sessions outside of your silo and network. Make a commitment to attend about one-third of

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sessions at SIOP that are primarily outside of your comfort silo. The same thing at Academy (although there are fewer practitioners there).

A better strategy is for academics to attend practitioner-oriented conferences where the bulk of the sessions are by, and for, practitioners. As a leadership scholar and a practitioner, the authors connected through one of those—the recently formed Global Followership Conference (https://www.followershipconference.com/). The International Leadership Association (ILA; https://ilaglobalnetwork.org/) is another organization that mixes scholars and practitioners and educators, as well as the Society of Psychologists in Leadership (formerly the Society of Psychologists in Management; https://www.psychleaders.org/). The Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM; https://www.shrm.org/home), and the Organization Development Network (https://www.odnetwork.org/default.aspx) conferences offer additional opportunities.

In practice

Practitioners do something similar in reverse. They can get out of their silo by attending an academic conference or the more academic-oriented sessions at the SIOP conference (or the equivalent). The practitioner author recently attended a predominantly academic conference. In attending academic research presentations this author learned of efforts where practical applications and contributions could be worthwhile. Perhaps more consequentially, relationships were established based on overlapping areas of mutual interest, leading to this and other collaborative research relationships. Sometimes, organizations of professionals, such as the Young Presidents' Organization (YPO; https://www.ypo.org/), will invite academics to speak on the latest research, which offers another opportunity for scholar–practitioner connections.

Another strategy is to spend some time reading the academic literature. Although a practitioner may not be compelled to read an entire scholarly journal article in the same way an academic might, most professional academic societies (SIOP, Academy of Management, Association for Psychological Science) have publications that provide summaries of streams of academic research or recently published articles. As a practitioner, scanning article abstracts can help determine what areas might be of most interest and worth a deeper dive to explore possible applications.

Don't perpetuate the divide

In academics

Unfortunately, most academic graduate programs explicitly or implicitly promote the superiority of scholarship over practice. In many traditional programs, graduate students who profess interest in a career as a practitioner are relegated to second-class status. This perpetuates the we versus they mindset that is at the heart of the divide.

Faculty members need to monitor their own biases in advising students on their career choices. Research methods courses should focus more on practical applications of research as well as incorporate examples of successful scholar–practitioner collaborative research. Students should be encouraged to not only gain experience in practice (e.g., internships) but to network with practitioners for advice on the implications and applications of translating their research into practice.

In practice

If you are providing jobs or internships to graduate students, ask if they are working on any related research projects. Consider making the offer to provide appropriate people in the organization who can be surveyed, if applicable. Some academic programs, especially in business, provide

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research and application group projects where you can partner with the university. A guided student team can embark on a project and produce an outcome that offers mutual benefits for both research and practice. Consider seeking these out. In fact, it may lead to relationships with students that could lead to the creation of future teams.

Connections

For academics

Networking at conferences, and through other means (e.g., connections with the business community, chambers of commerce, "town–gown" events, etc.), is critical for finding someone who has a passion for a shared topic. For example, the authors' collaboration began through a shared interest in the role of followers in the leadership equation, which has led to an ongoing research collaboration. Universities obviously have constituencies of practitioners on boards of trustees, advisory boards, alumni associations, and staff members who can be tapped for collaborations, both for new research endeavors, as well as providing ideas for turning research into programs of practice.

Another networking opportunity for academics is to reach out to faculty and students of academic programs that are more practitioner oriented. Although business schools with MBA and executive education programs have practice-experienced students, there are other graduate programs at other institutions in human resources, leadership, and other areas, with experienced students who can benefit from collaborations with faculty from different institutions. For example, our academic author has served on dissertation committees and served as a guest lecturer in some of these programs, which have led to research collaborations.

For practitioners

There is probably nothing an organization focuses on in practice that does not have an academic counterpart. At one college, for example, the agricultural department teams with local growers of strawberries to create an ongoing, mutually beneficial way to achieve research objectives with students and faculty while also providing opportunities to help the grower with insights, innovations, and findings that augment the need for a separate, dedicated research and development department. Consider if your organization or industry could benefit from such a partnership with a local academic department.

Transparency in contributions

To research

Throughout the years, the academic author has collaborated on research projects with practitioners, who have ranged from full partner and coauthor on published papers to those who have consulted with the research team or provided access to research participants. The American Psychological Association policy on journal article authorship is reserved for those who make "substantial scientific contributions to the research." Although determining what a "substantial contribution" entails is up to the research team, it makes sense to be clear about what each member of the team contributed to the research in the published article.

Perhaps there should be a new distinction between members of the research team who end up as full coauthors and those who were contributors to the research. To increase transparency, notes in published works could specify each member of the team's contributions to the product—something beyond the traditional acknowledgements of research team members that are placed in the authors' notes.

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In practice

Although a practitioner may not care as much about being named on an academic journal article in the same way an academic might, if your collaboration with the academic community produces material innovations, promote the collaborations in internal and external communications. If the work in an academic collaboration produces practical advances operationally, share it throughout the organization, to end customers, and to the community. Consider inviting the contributors from across the aisle to present the findings or results with you. Most organizations have come to realize that collaborative ties to the community helps to foster good will, and promoting these accomplishments as part of marketing and PR is a positive move.

Create the bridges

Academics to practitioners

Although many journals either encourage or require journal articles to have a section that discusses the practical implications of the research, in most cases, the practical implications are anemic (see Vosburgh, 2022). Rather than saying "practitioners should develop methods/means to implement these findings," the researchers can reach out to practitioners for concrete suggestions for how the research may (and may not) translate to practice. Journal editors and reviewers can reinforce this by asking for additional information about how the research can translate into practice.

Many academic journals are realizing that their content is not easily accessible (or translatable) to nonacademics. They are encouraging authors to write short summaries of their findings in layperson's terms and posting these on the journal websites. In addition (and moving away from the written word), some journals are including brief videos where the authors explain their research and possible implications for practice. The academic author has written a blog for *Psychology Today* for the past 15 years to help explain both the author's research and others' research to a general audience. This has led to bridging to practitioners as well as some research collaborations with practitioners over the years.

Practitioners to academics

If something is working uniquely well (or confoundingly not well) in your organization, consider reaching out to the academic community. It could be an issue with culture, process, or outcome. Even if you think you know exactly why something is working or not working, avoid the temptation of certainty. It's hard to read the label from inside your own jar. Consider a connection to a member of the academic community specializing in the field of study that encompasses your offerings. They may have a research project completed or in progress that applies. It would be more helpful to better understand what specifically about your successes or misses make it so. This is what the academic community does best: determining the material correlations and causations for why you are getting the outcomes you are getting. Creating such relationships could help you discover new ways to reproduce and scale what's working in ways you hadn't considered.

A word about motivation/incentives

Academics and practitioners alike may be thinking "Why would/should I bridge?" Admittedly, there is time and resources invested in attending conferences and networking to form potential collaborations. Academics can find research opportunities and learn better how research is translated to practice. Practitioners are in search of new and improved methods and techniques, and, perhaps, a deeper understanding of current practices and outcomes. For those of us who have created good scholar–practitioner connections, the payoffs are clearly worth the investments.

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