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COMMENTARY

Practitioners should seek collaborations too! Insights from a practitioner-led research institute

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Voss and colleagues' (2025) promotion of *engaged scholarship* is a worthwhile model for encouraging partnerships among academics and practitioners in the research process (Van de Ven, 2007). Drawing upon our experience founding and operating a practitioner-led research group ("the research institute") within a private consulting firm, we offer additional insights for partnering with academics and organizational stakeholders in research collaborations. First, we briefly describe the research institute and its purpose to provide an example of how a practitioner-led research institute can operate. Second, we argue for more precise discussions of the academic–practitioner divide. Third, we discuss additional benefits of collaborations from a practitioner perspective. Fourth, we share key benefits of research labs and institutes within private organizations. Through these topics, we hope to encourage practitioners to take more ownership of these partnerships.

Overview of our practitioner-led research institute

We were particularly interested in this discussion as our research institute was predominantly born in reaction to problems associated with the science–practice divide, and it resides within its boundaries. As has been demonstrated, academic research often ignores practically relevant theory and applications. As a result, the research institute takes the initiative to facilitate sound science to refine the theoretical foundation and application of the parent consulting firm's solutions. Of course, this includes conducting practitioner-led, internal research. More importantly, especially for this conversation, we also seek research collaborations with third-party academic researchers worldwide because we recognize that allowing scientists, who are not on the firm payroll, to examine our solutions provides less biased and novel insights. The degree to which we contribute to these collaborations ranges from merely sharing data or access to our assessments to being the lead author on the project, depending on the need and merit of the given study. As such, this example demonstrates the nuances associated with these academic–practitioner partnerships and advocates for more initiative on the part of practitioners and organizations to seek out and grant opportunities for collaboration.

One of the other side effects of the scientist–practitioner gap is that many students receive minimal exposure to practically relevant strategies and assessments. Therefore, applied research arms also open the opportunity to collaborate with professors to share practical knowledge and hands-on experience with tools used in practice through guest lectures and demonstrations to relevant undergraduate and graduate students across the globe (e.g., Naidoo, 2024). This example demonstrates another contribution that practitioner-led research institutes can have towards

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minimizing the science–practice divide. From our time working within the academic–practice gap within a practitioner company, we have noticed several nuances we believe contribute to confusion on how to best close the gap. Along these lines, a few clarifications are in order to further set the stage for the discussion.

Clarifying the academic–practice gap

As seen in prior discussions on the science–practice gap (e.g., Rynes, 2012; Zhou et al., 2024), the manner in which the practitioner side of the gap is defined is critical to understanding and providing recommendations for how to bridge said divide. For instance, there are several gaps between the science of industrial and organizational psychology (I-O) psychology and the practice of organizations depending on who is referred to on the practical side: an I-O trained practitioner, such as a consultant, or an organizational point of contact (POC), such as an HR professional or business leader. Many findings and recommendations in the relevant scientific literature may be challenging to digest for those without the requisite I-O knowledge to adequately interpret academically derived articles. Further, Zhou and colleagues (2024) demonstrated the challenges associated with providing theoretically driven solutions to small business owners through academic articles. In addition, a gap between the I-O trained practitioner and the organizational POC exists wherein clients do not implement science-based solutions and find I-O psychology recommendations, from consultants, irrelevant or burdensome. As such, when discussing research collaboration between academics and practitioners in the field, it is important to recognize that the degree to which collaborators can actively engage in the research process varies depending on the specific gap involved. In addition, reducing each gap will require unique approaches. Therefore, we argue that, when providing recommendations for bridging this elusive divide, it is first important to identify which gap we are attempting to minimize.

Given that we are I-O trained practitioners, we provide insights primarily from this perspective. When I-O trained practitioners are involved, it is important to acknowledge that the practitioner is just as responsible as academics for staying up to date on the latest industry trends and research. In fact, some graduate I-O programs teach this as an ethical responsibility of being an effective scientist–practitioner. The literature provides several benefits to both sides of the divide for the engagement in collaborative efforts (e.g., Banks et al., 2016; Fisher et al., 2023). Therefore, practitioners' employing organizations should encourage and support the practitioner to engage in these research efforts, which unfortunately seems to be a rare situation. There are many reasons why we I-Os should take steps to help I-O trained practitioners enjoy the support they need to actively stay connected to scientific research.

Additional benefits of practitioner research involvement

To support Voss et al.'s call to action, we provide further benefits that should motivate practitioner initiative and participation in engaged scholarship. First, being involved in applied research helps practitioners stay up to date with current trends in the field and allows for continued consumption of research, which is a skill that needs to be maintained in order to perform effectively as a scientist–practitioner.

Relatedly, by regularly taking the initiative to participate in research projects, I-O trained practitioners can maintain and even improve inferential statistical skills. In fact, we would go so far to argue that remaining statistically fluent is not simply a benefit of the research process; it is required for being a high-quality scientist–practitioner. If one does not understand statistical techniques, then one cannot fully understand scientific research findings, which further prevents their application.

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Beyond individual development, many practitioners overlook the fact that publishing relevant research also provides them with professional advantages; it is not only beneficial to academics. Authoring scientific articles publicly demonstrates expertise in an area. Because they are somewhat free of the academic pressures to publish in top academic-oriented journals, practitioners can further support progress by publishing in more accessible journals. Future employers, partners, and clients can and do use published articles to identify relevant experts. Peer-reviewed publications can also demonstrate the scientific backing of the tools and recommendations practitioners sell to clients. This is important for enhancing one's visibility and increasing the likelihood that one's services will be regarded as legitimate and valuable. Publishing in peer-reviewed outlets is also a great way to get novel, critical feedback on your approaches.

However, a peer-reviewed publication is not a necessary outcome of an academic–practitioner research collaboration. For instance, the outcomes of academic–practitioner work may not always be articles published in scholarly journals. Instead, in-house products, such as white papers, technical reports, or webinars, that are organizationally specific may be the result of such partnerships. It is also worth noting that this fact further reinforces Voss et al.'s point that, although it may be valuable to look at publication records as a way to quantify the collaboration between academics and practitioners, it may not capture the full breadth of the relationship. Although there are numerous benefits of periodically participating in research as a practitioner, we also share benefits learned through the operation of a research lab or institute as a practitioner.

Benefits of a practitioner-led research institute

The focal authors' recommendation for practitioners to develop research studies, reports, and research labs to provide valued insight and resources to the field resonates with the mission of the research institute. First, these applied research arms, hosted within or in partnership with private organizations, can provide robust, real-world data that are likely to be attractive to academic researchers and journals. These data, which are highly suitable for publication, are also well situated to provide the necessary constructs for answering highly practical and relevant research questions. For example, our consulting firm archives data from every validation study we conduct for our clients on their incumbents. The research institute regularly shares these de-identified datasets, which are much more practically relevant than having to rely on undergraduate or crowd-sourced samples, with outside researchers. Therefore, the research institute serves as an example for other organizations, which employ trained I-O practitioners to engage in the development of these applied research arms and can provide robust data. Although we recognize that not all organizations are able, or willing, to develop entire research divisions, this example still demonstrates the value of making data accessible to collaborators more generally. Such data sharing provides benefits both to the academic seeking publication and to the organization seeking validation and feedback on their applied solutions.

Although there are concerns over data sharing restrictions, these labs are most effective when led by trained applied researchers who can supplement the knowledge and skills of their academic counterparts and leverage their experience working with client proprietary data. For example, organizations can ask participants leveraging the organization's tools to provide informed consent to allow their data to be used for research purposes. When sharing the data, which should always de-identified, with external researchers, the practitioner-led research group can require collaborators to execute a data-sharing agreement to promote the legal, ethical, and responsible handling of the data. This example demonstrates that when applied research arms engage in data sharing, there are practical ways to protect the organization and their research participants.

Further, these institutes support an overarching goal of I-O psychology, which is to leverage scientific insights to solve pressing organizational issues, by ensuring that organizations are

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engaging in research that informs their practical work. In practice, it is common for consultants to provide advice that is based on insufficient scientific evidence because it is more attractive and easier to sell to the client. Maintaining a practitioner research group provides more opportunity and resources for consulting organizations to scientifically validate their recommendations, helping increase the quality of our field's services.

Although practitioner research groups are probably best aligned to I-O trained practitioners, they are also well positioned to facilitate partnerships across all corners of the academic–practice divide. Practitioners regularly interact with non-I-O business stakeholders in their day-to-day work, and they can use these connections to build diverse partnerships among academic I-Os, practitioner I-Os, and business stakeholders. For example, our research institute's I-O practitioners are currently in the middle of a research collaboration with an outside CEO, an external international business professor, and an outside I-O doctoral student. So far, each person has brought uniquely valuable contributions to the table. As such, these practitioner-led research groups are able to prioritize scientific rigor and increase organizational buy-in while expanding the network of collaborators that contribute their expertise. This sharing of knowledge from across the divide further promotes the value of these practitioner-led institutes while also highlighting that practitioners can engage in the applied research *process* even if their resident organization does not develop its own applied research *institute*.

Both academic and practical contexts present forces that can improperly bias research. Organizations can position practitioner researcher groups such that they have minimal commercial responsibility. In other words, organizations should shield practitioner researchers from responsibility to sell the broader organization's products or services as much as possible. Of course, funding is always a concern. However, there is potential for practitioner research institutes to leverage external funding. Doing so should help reduce the conflicts of interests inherent in the commercial world. Additionally, practitioner performance management models do not typically consider publication quantity or journal status, like that of academics. Although it makes sense to add some evaluation of research productivity, organizations have more flexibility in designing performance management systems for practitioner researchers in a manner that avoids biasing toward rapidly publishable projects or toward specific journals with their own sets of biases.

Practitioner-led research groups also offer desirable personnel implications. For instance, these research institutes, or the parent organization, can provide robust internship programs that attract exceptional I-O students from across the US and abroad. Naturally, there are not always enough full-time openings to offer to high-performing interns after graduation. The organization's research institute can thus provide a useful mechanism for maintaining relationships with quality interns after they leave, especially if it is designed to support external research collaborations. For example, the research institute can set up interns, who are interested in pursuing relevant lines of research, as external research collaborators, regardless of where they go next. This feature allows organizations to maintain a healthy network with its alumni, making it easier to coordinate future opportunities that may arise.

Beyond working with academic I-O psychologists directly in research projects, these practitioner-led research institutes can also partner with graduate programs more broadly. Establishing a relationship with graduate programs has significant value in bridging the gap between academia and practice, and addresses another call for action raised by the focal article. For instance, these institutes or labs can provide guest lectures or product demonstrations that will inform students on current practices used in the field. These efforts further offer the opportunity for conversations or the development of research ideas surrounding the current product or service. These relationships may also lend themselves to the aforementioned internship opportunities that allow for further collaboration between practitioners and the academic space, encouraging the sharing of knowledge and the development of practical research. By finding a mutual interest between the applied work being done in organizations and the interests of graduate students and

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faculty in I-O psychology programs, efforts can be made to encourage this model of engaged scholarship and continuous development of the field.

Conclusion

To close, we appreciate the opportunity to participate in the ongoing conversation on closing the science–practice gap in the I-O field. In support of Voss et al.'s calls to action, we outlined several practitioner-oriented benefits of staying engaged in research and even running a practitioner-led research group. Admittedly, however, we doubt much change will occur in practice until we can convince I-O trained practitioner's employing organizations to be more supportive of research, a topic which could likely fill a whole other issue of this journal. Nonetheless, we hope that the insights we shared further arm I-O practitioners, who are motivated to participate in research, to make compelling arguments to their employers.

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