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COMMENTARY

The Institute for Smarter Work doesn't exist—but it could

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The Society for Industrial and Organizational Psychology (SIOP), without a formalized vehicle for unbiased science translation and communication, will remain a group that primarily benefits its members, and the treasure of its body of knowledge will have a limited influence on a world that badly needs it. Professionals in the human resources (HR) function, who presumably constitute the most likely consumers of industrial and organizational (I-O) psychology principles and practices, are not likely to encounter evidence-based ideas when searching for practical assistance online. For example, one common HR topic that should be informed by I-O psychology research is delivering performance feedback. An HR professional searching for information about this topic on Google would find a variety of opinions and potentially conflicting ideas. The top results currently include (a) a list of 10 tips from Indeed.com, (b) a list of vague concepts such as "tolerate discord but be specific" from a consulting firm, and (c) a 2011 article from the *Harvard Business Review*. Although these sources may prescribe ideas that are not necessarily dangerous—and some might be somewhat helpful—none of them appear to draw heavily from our field's research, which includes important concepts such as the role of leader–member exchange in the performance feedback process (Elicker et al., 2006) or the well-substantiated idea of a feedback environment (Katz et al., 2021). Similar examples of this problem abound.

Our experiences as practitioners in large organizations (e.g., investment banks, the military, hospital systems), as consultants to organizations both large and small, and as cohosts of *The Indigo Podcast* have given us substantial exposure to the world outside of I-O psychology. Furthermore, one of us has a background and graduate degree completely outside of I-O psychology (accounting). Given those eclectic perspectives, we are fairly confident that we have a good sense for how people in organizations—including HR professionals—typically seek and find information about their business functions. They talk to each other, interact in online fora, and search the Internet for answers to practical issues. They by and large do not go to SIOP's website, and if they do, they will find that it is designed primarily for use by its members, not for cutting-edge science communication. It likely goes without saying, but these same professionals certainly do not read academic journal articles.

All of us—as scientist–practitioners attempting to promote a smarter workplace—can do better. SIOP is the premier organization for the advancement of our science, and its members are uniquely poised to influence the world of work in a positive way. Assuming that most SIOP members want to increase the visibility and influence of their profession, we have a tremendous collective opportunity, yet we will squander it if we do not take proactive steps soon.

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Imagine a world

Let's imagine, again, that same HR professional searching for information about delivering performance feedback. This time, though, that person finds among the top results an article written by a SIOP member that summarizes a recent meta-analysis along with evidence-based steps to consider. Perhaps they find a 3-minute video that breaks down some of the main lessons that we know from I-O psychology research and practice on the topic, along with links to resources for use in his organization—resources that are inviting and entertaining and that meet or exceed modern standards of production and pedagogy. Noticeably absent from these top findings are sales pitches from consulting firms or cursory platitudes on a firm's blog likely placed there primarily to optimize its search-engine ranking.

Imagine that these useful, evidence-based resources come from the Institute for Smarter Work (ISW), a nonprofit organization that functions as the public extension of SIOP. In both word and deed, our imaginary ISW exists to help people and leaders in organizations through the skillful communication of what we know from the organizational sciences. It creates viral-worthy content that debunks common myths about human behavior in the workplace, it provides training modules for managers and individual contributors, and it gives executives a roadmap for best practices in people management—drawing on the orthodox elements of organizational science. The ISW not only helps leaders and employees but also provides tremendous external visibility to SIOP, to researchers in the organizational sciences writ large, and to practitioners who are cracking the code for what evidence-based practice can be in the modern world of work. Managers would now have expert-vetted templates for the basics of recruiting, selection, onboarding, performance management, leader development, and more. Over time, it is plausible that the ISW's work would perhaps be included among top search results for topics within our domain of expertise. Imagine the possibility that top executives, when evaluating programs and courses of action for their organizations, might ask, "Does this align with what's coming out of the ISW?"

The ISW does all of this, and more, and it does it all for free. With no profit motive, the ISW would have the ultimate freedom to champion only those practices and ideas that are evidence based and would establish itself as an unbiased guide for people everywhere who are navigating the modern world of work. It could do all of this, but it doesn't exist—or at least not yet.

Obstacles to the Institute for Smarter Work

If the ISW or something like it is such a good idea, then why does it not exist already? Two potential reasons come to mind. First, perhaps the demand for evidence-based solutions by HR professionals is insufficient. This is a fair point, and one can certainly find many examples of fads and non-evidence-based practices across the spectrum of HR programs and practices. Our experience also suggests that HR professionals are often put in the tough position of needing to "do something" quickly or implement a directive from senior management regardless of whether evidence exists regarding the proposed action's efficacy. A related reason is the lack of incentives within the current reward structure for I-O psychologists. The "incentive problem" is well articulated in the focal article by Rogelberg et al. (2022) and is, in our view, the primary reason why something like the ISW does not exist.

Regarding the potential lack of demand for what the ISW might provide, our experience suggests that executives oftentimes do want solutions that really work, but those solutions need to be easily communicated, have face validity, and offer the assurance that others have used and benefited from the proposed action (e.g., social proof; Cialdini, 1993). These are important considerations but all ones that the ISW could address. As more fully described in the next section, the ISW could also address the matter of incentives—not by changing the reward structures in other organizations or academia but by directly employing a staff to do this noble work.

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One could further argue that the situation is not as dire as we depict. Other organizations do exist to support HR professionals and others concerned with the "human side" of industry. Two that come to mind are the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) and the Center for Evidence-Based Management (CEBMa). Both SHRM and CEBMa provide a useful set of services and support to managers, and a potential may exist for the ISW to partner with them. We are fans of both SHRM and CEBMa. Neither SHRM nor CEBMa, however, are backed by the full force of SIOP, nor are they yet, in our view, widespread trusted sources of information for executives outside of their own spheres of influence. Both SHRM and CEBMa fill important roles: SHRM supports the HR profession, and CEBMa supports better decision making. The ISW, however, could focus on the delivery of rapid, accurate, and high-quality translation and communication of the organizational sciences for the public. This is currently a gap in the professional landscape.

To address this gap, the ISW could bring together organizational scientists, communication professionals, and educators in an interdisciplinary environment that allows it to make viral-worthy, evidence-based content that would not exist solely on a single website that is seldom visited by people outside of our discipline. It would exist on all of the platforms where people already congregate: YouTube, TikTok, Instagram, and more. Such a strategy would not depend upon the hope that people would find I-O psychology content and then evaluate its utility. Instead, such a strategy is one of going out and engaging with our audience where it exists and providing content that will help them in their work and in their lives. If this content is produced at the level of quality we envision for the ISW, people will subscribe, follow, and share this content—driving deeper engagement and learning regarding all that I-O psychology has to offer and interest in those interventions that actually change the world of work for the better.

A potential path forward

The world could greatly benefit from a clear and trusted voice to express and clarify the elements of the settled corpus of I-O psychology literature. This voice must come from a place unencumbered by profit motives and other distracting incentives that would undermine the credibility of their efforts. Currently, there is no organization globally that is better poised to take up that mantle than SIOP given its focus on the world of work, its healthy mix of scientists and practitioners, and its appreciation for evidence-based practice (although we likely still have work to do, Briner & Rousseau, 2011). SIOP is a robust organization, with approximately 10,000 members and a history that goes back to 1945. The SIOP Foundation reported nearly $6.5 million in net assets in its 2020–2021 Annual Report. To create the ISW, we suggest the following steps:

1. Establish a launch committee

The ISW would be an organization created by SIOP for the benefit of the public and for the promotion of I-O psychology science and practice. A launch committee, perhaps nominated by the SIOP Executive Board (EB), would gather input on choosing a name (we are using the ISW for illustrative purposes, but we do like it), creating the mission, setting the strategy, determining how the ISW would best fit alongside SIOP's structure, and facilitating the relationships and channels for funding. This would best be handled by a committee that would steer both the launch of the ISW and the creation of the initial governance structures such as rules, regulations, and an initial board of directors.

2. Create the nonprofit organization

Next, the initial board of directors would undertake the requisite legal and administrative procedures to create the actual ISW entity. Such tasks including setting up a bank account structure, submitting the incorporation and nonprofit organization paperwork, and creation of bylaws

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including ethical standards. One way to ensure governance of the ISW by SIOP could be to include specific SIOP members as ex officio members of the ISW board. Some potential such positions include members of the EB or chairs of particular SIOP committees (e.g., Visibility). Once the initial structure of the nonprofit organization is created, the organization would need to secure initial seed funding. Such funding, which would go toward paying the staff, could come from the SIOP Foundation, corporate donors, high-net-worth individuals, or a combination of these sources.

3. Hire staff members

Because the major obstacle to creating something like the ISW is the current incentive structure, those who work for the ISW should be full-time paid employees. We envision the initial staffing needs to include

- an executive director who would oversee the overall execution of the ISW's mandate to include managing center staff and deliverables,
- organizational scientists who can help with scientific oversight, literature reviews, and other critical tasks to inform ongoing content creation,
- a director of development who would raise funds and connect the ISW with critical stakeholders to ensure its ongoing success, and
- marketing communication and education professionals who would help the team translate evidence-based insights into memorable and accessible media for the nonscientific general public.

4. Begin delivery and development

Once the strategy has been set, the board has been created, and key members have been hired, the ISW will deliver on three lines of effort:

1. creating content that teaches and makes accessible the body of knowledge of I-O psychology for decision makers and the general public,
2. delivering that content using cutting-edge technologies while creating enduring media properties that become the go-to places online for knowledge and resources pertaining to matters within our domain of expertise, providing a remedy to the non-evidence-based ideas and resources that currently permeate the digital landscape, and
3. raising funds to ensure the sustainable existence of the ISW while continually expanding its reach.

5. Evaluation and review

The ISW would need to adhere to a cadence of governance as set by the ISW board, which could include at the very least several SIOP leaders as ex officio members. This evaluation and review should include systematic review of the organization's performance, alignment with its mission, use of resources, and management of stakeholders. This step ensures that the ISW stays closely aligned with the goals of SIOP and that both organizations leverage their respective strengths to further their missions. In addition to reviewing the ISW's deliverables, such governance would ensure ethical oversight over issues such as conflict of interest, financial audits, and related matters.

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Concluding thoughts

Since its inception, SIOP has done tremendous work for the profession of I-O psychology, and it has done so with a model that is driven almost entirely by its volunteers (721 of them in 2020–2021). The organization has succeeded thus far with a minimal staff of 12 people. This has worked—and will continue to work—in many areas of what SIOP does. This model has not worked, nor will it work in the future, within the specific area of rapid, accurate, and high-quality translation and communication of the organizational sciences for the public. SIOP is not currently structured to compete with the continuous, ever-increasing flow of misinformation and disinformation present in the digital landscape. The ISW provides a remedy. We have already purchased the domain name www.instituteforsmarterwork.org and will give it immediately to SIOP upon request. The ISW aligns perfectly with SIOP's mission, vision, and goals (see https://www.siop.org/About-SIOP/Mission). Is SIOP willing to take a bold step to directly influence the world of work? If so, we think the ISW is the solution needed to bring I-O psychology and evidence-based practice to the masses.

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