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Commentaries

Allies From Within: I-O Practitioners in Organizations

Meghan Lowery
Eli Lilly & Company

Joel Nadler
Southern Illinois University Edwardsville

Dan J. Putka
Human Resources Research Organization

The focal article (Lapierre et al., 2018) highlights many good suggestions but only briefly mentions partnering with an academically trained internal industrial and organizational (I-O) practitioner. We believe beginning a partnership with a similarly trained ally well-versed through training in academic language and through experience in "business speak" will yield a stronger end result. The appreciation for an internal I-O practitioner should not go overlooked; when an academic partners with the right practitioner in the right environment, the partnership can be mutually beneficial and more rewarding than other options. For instance, recently we collaborated to set up a partnership for scientific discovery and mutual interest that involved 12 teams representing 14 different institutions spanning academe and practice to conduct a machine learning competition. This partnership enabled many academics and practitioners access to a complex organizational dataset in order to contribute to both an organization and the Society for Industrial and Organizational Psychology (SIOP) community (see Putka et al., 2018).

Many medium to large organizations hire one or many I-O practitioners, resulting in natural allies for academics. Using a trained fellow I-O psychologist as the point of contact may help academics and others outside the organization surmount hurdles and clear organizational barriers. Convincing senior leadership—should the project need their permission and oversight—is much easier when there is an internal, like-minded partner doing some of

Meghan Lowery, HR Talent Management, Eli Lilly & Company; Joel Nadler, Department of Psychology, Southern Illinois University Edwardsville; Dan J. Putka, Human Resources Research Organization.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Meghan Lowery, HR Talent Management, Eli Lilly & Company, Indianapolis, IN. E-mail: lowery_meghan@lilly.com

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the legwork. Leveraging those internal resources can take the project much further than you might think. Not naïve to methodological rigor and the practical value of empirical research, the internal I-O practitioner can help balance what is ideal versus what is acceptable, permissible, and/or feasible in their particular organization.

Beyond simply helping to navigate the organizational hierarchy to seek buy-in for research, internal I-O practitioners can also provide a critical wealth of institutional knowledge. These include key points of contact and knowledge of the history and details surrounding key sources of data that may inform an academic's research questions of interest. In our experience, there tends to be far more complexity in archival data stemming from various areas of an organization than data stemming from a tidy, academic study with strict collection protocols. Leveraging real organizational data in a meaningful way, whether it is to provide insights for organizational practice or to test some academic hypotheses would benefit from a seasoned practitioner's perspective, not only with respect to limitations of the data being used but also what the data mean (e.g., with respect to both content and structure). These are not insights academic researchers will get from the C-suite, general managers, or union reps, but will come from people most attuned to methodological and data management issues on the ground: practicing I-Os and their data owner(s)/points of contact within their organizations.

Aside from the insights internal I-Os can provide to people and data relevant to an academic's research, quant-savvy I-O practitioners are likely to have experience in dealing with complex methodological issues that go far beyond a controlled academically oriented study. This experience may be of value to not only an academic's research at hand but also the broader I-O community. For example, consider several of the cutting-edge methodological topics of interest in academe, such as dealing with missing data and analyzing multilevel, cross-classified, and longitudinal data. The methodological challenges of dealing with such data are not only present in practice, but they manifest with far greater levels of complexity than are typically encountered in tightly controlled academic work. I-O practitioners are perhaps the most well-attuned to where gaps exist between the extant methodological literature, I-O training, and the reality of what we must deal with in practice. This is important for two reasons. First, quant-savvy practitioners are well experienced in dealing with data and analyses in situations where the literature provides no clear answer for how to best address the methodological complexities that are present. Second, besides providing an experienced partner for an academic confronted with such complexity, I-O practitioners can serve as a valuable font of ideas with respect where science–practice gaps lie in terms of

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methods. Simply put, there are a myriad of methodological problems occurring within practice on which the existing I-O literature is silent; practitioners see both worlds: what exists in the literature and the realities that exist internally. I-O practitioners can help illuminate those gaps for academics, which can lead to fruitful collaborations between academic and practitioners that not only fill gaps in the literature but also serve a practical methodological need that impacts the quality of internal organizational research.

I-O practitioners can also help determine the type of study that would be most appropriate. For instance, it is quite hard to convince leadership that a study design, full of rigor, near-perfect sample sizes, specific dates/times, control groups, intervention, and measurement is "worth it." There may be compromises that the internal I-O practitioner could suggest, given his or her own history with the organization, knowing how far they have been able to take similar plans. Alternatively, for organizations that have had a series of measurements (e.g., annual surveys) in place for a number of years, archival research on previously collected data paired with real-time data (e.g., sales results) can be quite rich. Archival data should not be discounted if the measurement rigor was strong in the first place. The first author often jokes that she is sitting on many theses and dissertations worth of data that have been collected over the years! It is difficult as a practitioner to reach outward and ask for partnerships due to limited time and other priorities, but this is an even stronger reason why academics should feel comfortable trying to leverage internal I-O resources.

The final topic to touch on is funding/compensation. Remember, a business is doing just that: business. There may be some flexibility for funding, but only if it comes with a clear return on investment (ROI) plan and the need to sell how the information that is gained can be useful to the organization. An internal I-O practitioner can help an external academic think through these end goals in order to yield a "yes" when you ask a business to open its processes and/or data up to external research. Alternatively, academic funding can certainly help "sweeten the deal" if an external researcher approaches the organization with funding already in place.

There are many opportunities to partner with internal I-O practitioners who have had the same academic training, appreciate the need for rigor and scientific-based interventions, but are now working in the more economically driven business environment. The benefits of potential partnerships cannot be understated: improvements in an organization more clearly aligned with organizational realities, better outcomes and utilization of the results for employees, scientific advances for the I-O field, contributions by both academics and practitioners, and certainly, research progress and recognition for the academic. *So as an academic, you might ask, how do I find I-O practitioners who might be willing to partner?* First, look at who's in

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front of you. We have our networks of former colleagues, former classmates, and former students who are in practice. Pick up the phone, write an email, and gauge interest. Ask your I-O contacts in organizations about what their pain points are and what barriers may exist to collaboration. Look through the annual SIOP conference program to find practitioners who are taking the time to present and do work that is in line with your program of research. Do not be shy about reaching out to them.

Ironically, in our collaborations with academics, it is not uncommon *for us to reach out to them*. The initial contact may go something like this, "I'm working on this problem that's pervasive in practice that I think you might find really interesting. I don't really see a clear solution for it in the literature, and I think it has the potential to lead to some innovative, publishable work that fills an important gap. I'm familiar with your research and I think you can help it along. Interested?" Of course, the script can easily be flipped if the academic initiates context. In either case, the goal is the same: trying to establish an initial compelling reason to start a conversation and begin a path toward fruitful collaborations between academe and practice among two people with similar training and complementary insights. An academic and an I-O practitioner working together can bring significant value to the table and begin building a strong and potentially long-term partnership benefiting both the science and practice of I-O. Remember, you have allies!

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