


COMMENTARY

Let me in: Building an I-O bridge that combats the subtle redlining of the scientist–practitioner gap

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Amid discussions of the scientist–practitioner gap in I-O, it is often assumed that there is a single bridge to cross that has two parties on either side: academic researchers and practitioners. However, whether intentionally or not, small businesses have largely been neglected in efforts to fortify the bridge between the aforementioned parties, leaving the route between academic research and small businesses poorly maintained. As such, our commentary will focus on various aspects of the points of invitation for debate provided in Zhou et al. (2024), namely the prevalence of the scientist–practitioner gap between I-O researchers and small business owners and the access small businesses have to academic research insights. Although all authors on this paper are I-O-trained researchers working in and contributing to the academic field, two coauthors are also small business owners, adding nuanced richness to this conversation. Further, as diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) researchers, we consider equitable access to the knowledge generated by academic research as a key principle to our work.

As DEI researchers and practitioners, we have seen DEI efforts evolve from symbolic or forced gestures to business imperatives with a strategic focus and annual budgets. In the past four years, the value placed on DEI in the workplace has markedly increased, bringing about the above-mentioned shift in approach. Preceding this shorter term change, the past 30 years have brought an increased interest in DEI from the business world and academia (Yadav & Lenka, 2020). A quick Google search of “how to implement DEI in the workplace” yields pages of lists by business resources such as SHRM, HBR, and Forbes about the most common approaches to DEI in organizations (e.g., Buss, 2022).

Among these lists, a common theme includes holding leadership accountable through measurable progress and developing trackable objectives (Forbes Human Resource Council, 2023). This shift in approach has been necessary because the first few decades of workplace DEI initiatives have lacked this basic metrics-driven approach. Lily Zheng makes this point in an April 2024 *Harvard Business Review* article as she discusses the use of poor approximations for progress regarding DEI, such as tracking meeting and webinar attendance, the number of emails distributed, and full-time staff hires (Zheng, 2024). Building data-focused, measurable systems compels businesses to lean on evidence-based practices identified through empirical, peer-reviewed research. Without small business employees having access to such research, efforts toward progress become much more of a guessing game for those responsible for DEI initiatives (Kalev et al., 2006). Although the challenges introduced by the science–practice gap for small business owners who want to improve DEI are unmistakable, access to the “evidence” in “evidence-based practice” is important for all areas of business.

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Where is the gap, and why might it exist?

We know that small businesses matter (e.g., Zhou et al.), that focused approaches to DEI matter (e.g., Hebl et al., 2020), and that evaluating the effectiveness of DEI interventions matters (e.g., Bezrukova et al., 2016), and so where is this differential gap between small businesses compared to larger companies coming from? An uncomfortable and inescapable aspect of the gap is embedded in the way that I-O research is typically conducted. Whether it is statistical requirements for large datasets, a different orientation on workplace issues, or a desire to serve the most powerful players at the table (i.e., large organizations), I-O research questions, findings, and implications are implicitly geared toward larger businesses. This isn't to say that this has been an intentional effort, but it will happen when it is easier to gather data from 200 employees in a single organization (or students at a university) than it is to study a phenomenon with 200 employees from 50 distinct small businesses. As such, a large amount of the recommendations that flow from I-O research are most applicable when implemented within large organizations with larger staff numbers and budgets (e.g., improving the performance evaluation system or DEI policy). Further complicating matters is the fact that the majority of interactions taking place in small businesses are directly between the customers and employees. They are facing DEI issues in terms of how customers treat them and how they treat customers, which is different from many large organizations in which discrimination and a lack of inclusion stem from fellow employees. This is a reality reflected in a recent U.S. Chamber of Commerce profile of business owners, where the business owners reported focusing on ensuring equitable access to their product(s) and/or service(s), and on creating a welcoming and inclusive environment for their customers (Forstadt, 2021).

Drawing on personal sentiments from working in the DEI industry, firms rarely have access to, and thus seldom utilize, the body of knowledge I-O has produced on DEI practices. Additionally, many DEI firms do not engage in structured data collection efforts to evaluate the effectiveness of their often quite pricy initiatives, primarily due to some combination of a lack of time, resources, and expertise. Indeed, one of the practitioner coauthors used to work for a firm that provided DEI training but only conducted an evaluation of its effectiveness when specifically requested by the client. The much-discussed backlash against DEI has prompted a push from leaders to require evidence of the effectiveness of the intervention for employee functioning. This shift in organizations seeing the collection of DEI data as a business imperative is a welcome change, even if the manner in which it has come about is not.

What to do about the Barriers to Access

One major hurdle for small business owners to take advantage of cutting-edge I-O research and practice is the difficulty in accessing and understanding published scientific research. Zhou et al. allude to the difficulties that publisher paywalls introduce and note that many small business owners, including numerous I-O practitioners, simply do not have the resources to pay for journal access to read new (or old) research. Although Google Scholar and other sites like ResearchGate sometimes provide access to author-provided versions of papers or preprints, this is not guaranteed, nor is it curated. A Google Scholar search of "How to improve DEI small business" generates 285,000 results; and if the business owner did not have the know how to seek evidence-based or scientific sources on Google Scholar, then that same search on the general Google page yields roughly 77 million results!

This problem is two pronged. First, researchers may want to provide wide access to their articles for free to reach people who could benefit from it, but often cannot due to publisher restrictions (i.e., the paywall). Second, small business owners, practitioners, and others who could benefit from I-O research do not always know how or where to access the "evidence" to inform "evidence-based practice" or otherwise cannot afford the access. For researchers, we recommend

being clear eyed about the opportunities you have to share author copies and preprints with the public, or to encourage publishers, universities, and others to support open-access practices. Many Indigenous scholars and DEI researchers have been leading the charge with the growing open-access movement so that their findings are available to a broader audience and can therefore be applied outside the research setting.

One way that practitioners who want to use an evidence-based approach to their work with clients have gotten around this “dreaded paywall” is to employ graduate students to do a literature review on the topic for which a product or service will be developed. In this way, the practitioner has access to the full articles as needed (not only abstracts), as well as a summary of the extant literature. Using this knowledge, the practitioner can design inclusive leadership academies, employee training programs, coaching sessions, strategic planning initiatives, and so forth based on the most recent research available. Other recommendations for I-O researchers and practitioners to share research and practice innovations with small business owners and the business community more broadly are contained in the next section.

I’m sold, but where do I start?

Seeing as researchers and practitioners do not always read or engage with the same scholarly journals, the bridging of that gap—particularly for small business owners who do not have I-O backgrounds but conduct consulting work well-aligned with I-O—might partially be addressed via publishing in more practitioner-focused media such as *Harvard Business Review* or *Organizational Dynamics*, where the rigor of research can be married with the framing for a business or management audience. I-Os can add to the literature by conducting research with employees from small businesses as the targeted set of participants, which could include generating research questions unique to the small business context (e.g., how external client relations impact the stress levels of employees at consulting firms). Study participants could be sourced by having researchers recruit participants through Small Business Development Centers (<https://www.sbdnet.org/find-your-local-sbdc-office/>), located in cities across the U.S. that specifically support small businesses and are administered by the US Small Business Administration (SBDCNet, 2024).

Zhou et al.’s finding that their small business SMEs appreciated the practical implications sections of articles more than abstracts highlights the importance of making the research conceptually accessible to non-I-Os who might not have the technical knowledge to parse through academic and statistics lingo but might benefit from the insights. To that point, in a recent fact-gathering conversation with 10 HR professionals in small organizations, one of our coauthors discovered that research summaries provided need to be less than one page or a simple infographic. The group of professionals indicated that they lacked the capacity to dig into resources much longer. Creating such research translation resources can be done via podcasts, short blog articles, or LinkedIn posts (other distribution methods exist, but these are some of the more prominent ones). When executed well, sharing the insights from I-O research can increase the reach and impact of our field on small businesses and their employees. Outlets like Dr. Paul Spector’s blog and the “Department 12 Podcast” by Dr. Ben Butina in addition to the sizable number of I-O professionals using LinkedIn posts as opportunities to provide a 100-foot view of their research with clear and concise takeaways for any audience help to pave the way forward. LinkedIn can be a great tool, especially because readers can instantly engage with and comment on the post, thereby sparking conversations about the work. Here is an example 2024 LinkedIn post from Dr. Keith Yeates (professor of Psychology at the University of Calgary), where he writes a succinct summary of some research findings:

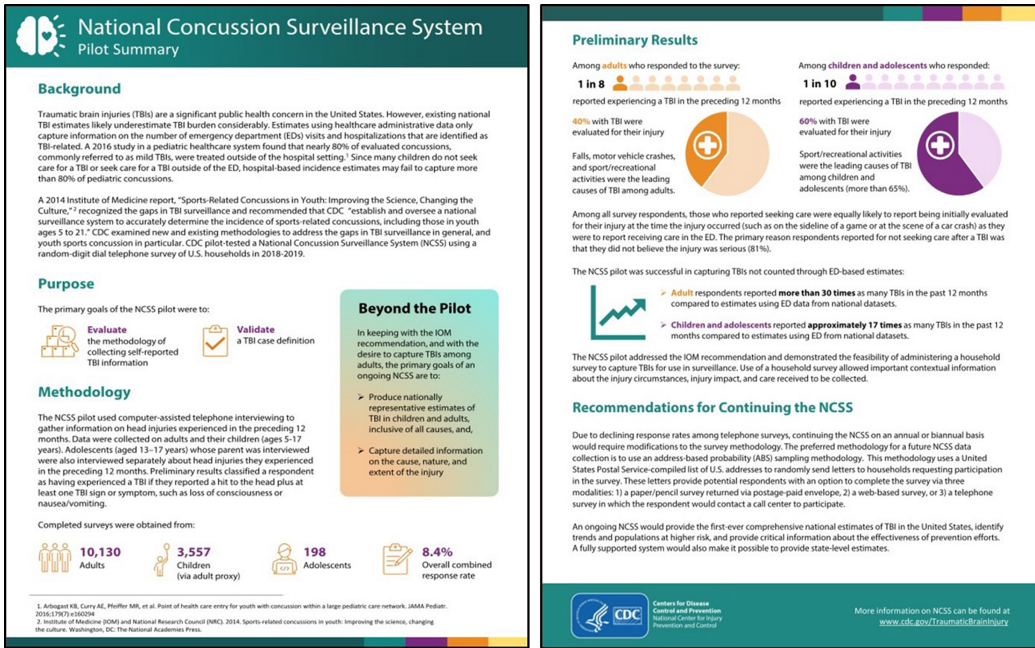


Figure 1. Graphic posted by Dr. Keith Yeates to LinkedIn to share psychology research findings (Graphic provided with Dr. Yeates' permission; Yeates, 2024).

Communicate: Make it Concise, Crisp, and Clear

The pilot summary depicted above in Figure 1 contains several key components to disseminating research findings in an accessible manner: (a) clear communication about what the question(s) of interest were, (b) discussion of why the topic is important, and (c) description of some of the key findings and implications. Whether we utilize tools like Canva to make discussion of our research both aesthetically and scientifically pleasing, add emojis to highlight key concepts, or stick with plain text, the focus should be on informing professionals from other industries about the relevance of the work we do as I-Os rather than to demonstrate our expertise to others in I-O and related fields as we would in scholarly journal articles. Instead, researchers should highlight examples of key findings that are easily applied in small businesses—whether it be around the utility of structured versus unstructured interviews (e.g., Sackett et al., 2022) or the wide-reaching effects of managerial support and dyadic relationships on the employee experience (e.g., Henderson et al., 2008)—in a way that practitioners can understand and act upon. Effective scientific communication is about not only knowing the content (e.g., evidence-based approaches to improving workplace inclusion climate) but also being able to share it with various audiences (e.g., HR practitioners, DEI consultants, etc.) in an understandable manner. Practitioners often don't have time to read journal articles in their entirety, so including summaries of the research, such as the one included in Roberson et al. (2020)'s Field Review, can increase the impact I-O research could have. We summarize recommendations for the *why*, *what*, *where*, and *how* of sharing I-O research and practice insights with a broad audience to reach small business owners and others in Figure 2 below.

Bridging the Gap for the Future as well as the Present

From a curricular perspective, having more exercises where researchers and practitioners can practice thinking about feasible solutions for small businesses could be beneficial. Having an

<p>(1) Why researchers should share</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ★ Establishing credibility as researchers and practitioners, particularly when it comes to collaborations ★ Staying up to speed on business needs ★ Improving more workplaces through active engagement with businesses of all sizes and their employees 	<p>(3) Where to share</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ★ Practitioner-focused media (e.g., <i>Harvard Business Review</i>) ★ LinkedIn ★ Podcast episodes ★ Small business/community organizations ★ Within the article preview alongside the abstract provided by the publisher
<p>(2) What to share</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ★ Research question(s) ★ Lessons learned in practice ★ Importance of a research project or publication and what gaps it fills ★ Accessible takeaways of research findings and their implications 	<p>(4) How to share</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ★ Use plain language ★ Write as if you are speaking to a friend or family member who is unfamiliar with I-O, science, and statistics ★ Tailor your message to the audience you would like the work to reach

Figure 2. Sharing I-O Research Insights Toolkit.

activity embedded in a graduate class or a professional workshop where learners are provided real or simulated opportunities to implement I-O solutions to real small business challenges is an easy place to start. Our experience, as educators, students, and practitioners, has been that working directly with organizational partners from small businesses provides benefits to both the I-O field (e.g., in terms of ideas, access, and development) and the communities we serve (e.g., in terms of business and practice solutions). Therefore, we recommend, when possible, that academics collaborate with a small business partner who would benefit from I/O research and practice (e.g., redesigning their selection process or evaluating the effectiveness of their DEI training). Engaging with small businesses in this way can help increase the credibility of researchers by building industry connections and that of small businesses by strengthening the quality of their interventions. I-O graduate students would also benefit because they will enter the field knowing the value of science–practice collaborations with small business partners, thereby securing future renovation of the bridge.

Final Crossing

We agree with Zhou *et al.*, that despite ongoing conversations about the pervasiveness of the scientist–practitioner gap in I-O psychology, the extent to which that gap exists for small businesses is rarely discussed. As DEI researchers, practitioners, and small business owners, we have set forth potential solutions to help address the concerning findings within the focal article by Zhou and colleagues. Researchers should consider what journal outlets they utilize and who their target audience is, and ensure to the best of their ability that small business owners and others can access their insights (see an example in Figure 2, and recommendations in Figure 1). We also contend that I-O graduate students and faculty should intentionally grapple with unique concerns of the 47.5% of the US population employed by small businesses. Knowledge is power, and we believe that increased (and improved) access to evidence-based research today will not only improve the modern workplace but also facilitate the reduction of scholarly redlining for businesses of all sizes.

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