Time to meet our match

Alan G. Walker argues for an international online community for psychologists to ease collaboration and bridge the science–practitioner divide

In a recent journal article I discussed how practising psychologists and academics alike might increase or otherwise improve the practical mileage they receive from academic journals (Walker, 2008). Although the article was specifically tailored to industrial/work/ and organisational (I/W/O) psychologists, the basic principles can be applied to all areas of professional psychology. In this article I will briefly outline these principles, before extending my argument to propose an online community to help psychologists to build bridges throughout their own communities and beyond.

Increasing practitioner involvement

In Walker (2008) I argued that most of us conduct rather cursory scans of the article titles contained in a journal table of contents. We quickly identify papers for further reading or review that directly bear on our own projects, client-base, or research streams. I argued that in order to add value to our journal-scanning we might consider modifying our frame of reference. In addition to scanning for topics we might also scan for relevant statistical or methodological techniques (ethnography, using interviews); specific populations that might be of special interest to us or our organisations (e.g. part-time workers, children, depressed individuals); or specific actions that may be of interest to us or our organisation (e.g. diversity training, specific therapies,

group interventions). By modifying our scanning in this way I believe that we can leverage the usefulness and practicality of others' work to our own work.

I also pointed out that research shows that in my particular area of expertise (I/W/O psychology) collaborations amongst academicians and practitioners in writing journal articles has been the exception rather than the rule, even dating back to the period 1949–1964 (Anderson et al., 2001). Even more striking, Anderson et al. (2001) noted that research articles in journals wherein all authors are practitioners are now 'virtually extinct', representing only 1–3 per cent of all papers in the *Journal of Applied Psychology* and *Personnel Psychology* (top-tier I/W/O journals). The authors assert that the trend of fewer and fewer practitioners being involved with the publication process will slowly result in more of our published research falling into the 'pedantic' as opposed to 'pragmatic' categories. That is, our research will become increasingly sophisticated and rigorous, but will be of much less practical value and will become increasingly focused on topics of only academic interest. Our research will become increasingly 'ivory-tower' or esoteric as opposed to being relevant to

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those who practise psychology.

I suggested that one obvious avenue to pursue in reference to our journals becoming (and remaining) more practitioner-relevant, is to increase practitioner involvement in the research and publication enterprise. The good news is that practitioners do not have to attempt the daunting publication process alone. The answer, in short, is collaboration, or what Anderson (2007) refers to as the 'mutual research group' bridging mechanism. While practitioners are likely to have access to data and ideas for practical research, academics possess competencies related to research design, statistical analyses, and literature and theory in a given research area.

So far, so obvious, you may be thinking. If that's the case, why isn't it happening? A separate article could be written about the beliefs and motivations of all the relevant parties. But I prefer to start with the assumption that there are plenty out there who would like to be doing more of this, and then focus on the practicalities. Before all of this collaboration can occur, there needs to be a mechanism that matches practitioners and academics who are interested in collaborating with each other on similar interests and research areas, and in ways that complement and leverage the talents of each party.

Enter the internet!

The internet appears to have become an increasingly important match-making mechanism for many different people seeking to make many different types of matches. For example, on websites such as Monster.com, millions of jobseekers are searching for jobs that match their interests and needs while, simultaneously, thousands of employers are seeking to match jobseekers to jobs they currently have available. Similarly, millions of other people are seeking to turn some trinket or knick-knack they have inherited from their aunt Polly into cash by seeking someone who may be interested in purchasing such a trinket on ebay.com. In the mood for love and romance? Try match.com. Have a knackered old chainsaw that you would rather give away than throw out? Check out freecycle.org.

The point is that the field of psychology can do a lot

references

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impact: Moving from inspections of topics to scans for techniques, populations, and actions. *Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology, 81*, 1–10.

more in terms of making matches amongst ourselves. Of course such an idea is not new: during the 2007 annual conference of the Society for Industrial and Organizational Psychology (SIOP), a panel was formed with a directive to 'check-in' with the science-practitioner model and discuss how contemporary issues facing the field might affect the viability and interpretation of this model. During this panel discussion Ed Locke presented some creative ideas surrounding a science-practitioner networking website, where researchers could learn about issues practitioners are observing in the field and find sites for conducting field experiments, and practitioners could read summaries and abstracts of the current research being published in the journals. Locke noted that it will only be through such information-sharing that we as psychologists will be able to live up to the scientist-practitioner model (for a summary of this panel discussion see Rupp & Beal, 2007).

Yet in an age where thousands of websites are launched every day, we have still not fully sought to leverage the power of the Web in making such connections. There are some general networking sites for scientists and others – see www.2collab.com, www.collectivex.com, www.linkedin.com and www.ziki.com/en. But there does not appear to be anything out there specifically for psychologists, tailored in the way I imagine.

Let me provide an example. Perhaps I am a practising I/W/O psychologist who has been asked by senior leaders to evaluate the effectiveness of a recently implemented employee training programme. The problem is that I do not have the time. Further, if I am honest with myself, I also do not have the interest in such complex research design and statistical analyses (if I did, I would have become an academic!). Also suppose that my budget is strapped and I do not have funds available to hire an expensive consultant. In short, I need to find an academic – preferable an academic who is simultaneously interested in identifying organisations and subsequent data that will support their research stream in the area of employee training. Where could I go to seek such a match? Or, suppose I am a clinical psychologist who has recently been asked by my funding agency to empirically demonstrate the effectiveness of my newly developed group therapy to treat anxiety disorders. Where can I turn? Or suppose that I am a school psychologist who has a 'hunch' that I believe will revolutionise the way

we educate inner-city children and have 15 years of data that I have collected, but may need help in entering, analysing, and drawing empirically related conclusions. Where might I turn for help?

In fact, while I agree that closing the gap between science and practice is important, my own ideas and vision about such information-sharing is much more broad and all-encompassing. In short, my vision is for an international website where:
- any practising psychologist (school, clinical, I/W/O, developmental, experimental, etc.) could seek a scientist (perhaps to obtain help with analysing a data set);
- a scientist could seek a practitioner (most likely in an attempt to collect data for their research stream and in the process provide free consultation);
- a practitioner could seek another practitioner (for support, advice, etc.);
- a scientist could seek out another scientist (perhaps to learn about a new statistical technique).

Of course, questions remain about who might support such a website and what might be its basic platform and infrastructure. Perhaps a professional psychological association such as the British Psychological Society or the American Psychological Association could serve as the host. Such associations currently possess the technical expertise to operate international websites that already have a great deal of internet traffic. In terms of financial resources, I would venture that most psychologists would agree to pay a few extra pounds/euros/dollars for such a service.

Otherwise, given enough interest across a large number of individuals, such a website might require a very modest fee to register – just enough to cover the additional personnel needed to maintain it.

Basic infrastructure
As can be seen in the figure above, the process might begin with each psychologist developing an online profile that could be seen by all other members. Basic information such as highest degree earned, country currently residing in, language(s) spoken, setting of employment (e.g. university, non-profit, for-profit) whether one considers oneself to be primarily a scientist or practitioner, areas of specialised expertise (e.g. quantitative skills, cognitive-based therapy, forensic psychology) and whether one believes they might be able to serve as a consultant to others in the community (either other practitioners or other scientists, or both other practitioners and scientists) could be obtained. Of course, many other types of information could be collected.

The second step in the process would then be to ascertain from each visitor what they want to do. For example, a practising I/W/O psychologist might be interested in finding a university-based scientist with an interest in employee satisfaction and quantitative skills for help with an applied project where senior-level leaders have asked for him or her to evaluate whether or not employee satisfaction is related to profitability. In such a case, the practitioner would go to that 'cyber mechanism' on the website

that has the ability to seek, identify and 'match' other members who have these skills and interests. There could also be message boards where one could post 'scientist wanted' or 'data wanted' bulletins, observations from the field or ideas for an interesting research project. Need help immediately on an applied project? One could choose from amongst a number of specialty-area chatrooms to interact immediately with others. Need fresh ideas, case studies, or ideas for the classroom? One could visit a special 'educational resource room' where free materials could be downloaded.

Challenges

The ideas and applications for such an online community are as limitless as our imagination, interest and resources. The ideas in Figure 1 and described above are only to 'prime the pump'. Obviously there are other issues that would need to be addressed. How could we generate interest and ensure that such a website would be used (particularly by organisations, who may not even realise that what they need is a psychologist)? How would we handle differences in
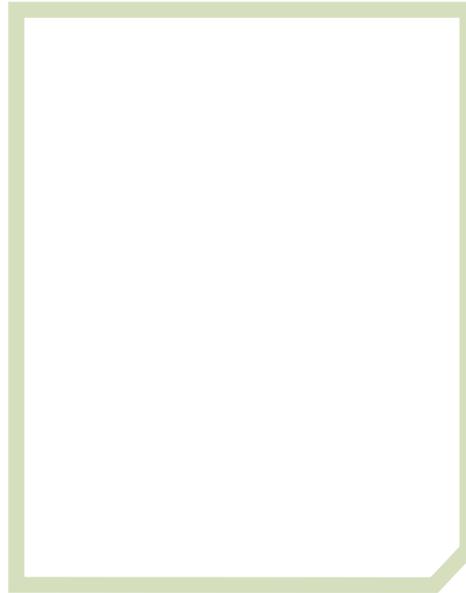
languages? How would we secure the site and ensure that members' profiles contained honest and accurate information? How could we prevent the site from becoming commercialised? How would we ensure it was clearly 'for

psychologists', while not excluding the possibility for multidisciplinary work that could be so important? Although challenging and needing a great deal of work, I believe these obstacles could be overcome with the right technologies and innovative minds.

In summary, I believe that as psychologists we can be doing much more to establish meaningful international relationships and collaborations amongst ourselves. These collaborations can be useful (and also enjoyable!) in bridging the science–practice chasm, in helping us understand each other better, in building friendships, and in helping us find the assistance we might need as either scientists or practitioners or both. The world is fast becoming one vast community that has become united by the Web. I hope that this brief article may help in generating further ideas as to how the internet can help unite us as psychologists.

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