

REVIEW ARTICLE

How is human resource management research (not) helping practice? In defence of practical implications

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Abstract

This article provokes that human resource management (HRM) research is a long way from helping practice. Following a review of HRM empirical articles published in 2018, we show the limited focus academic journals place on practical implications. We provoke that HRM journals are failing to 'do the right thing' by not requiring authors to pay enough attention to communicating the practical implications of their research. In half of the articles that we reviewed ($n = 324$) less than 2% of the text focuses on practical implications. We also found that where practical implications were offered, they were often obscure, implicit, and used unintelligible terms. We argue for extensive practical implications to be included in publications that provide an impetus to research relevant topics and close the knowledge-translation gap.

KEYWORDS

HR practices, HRM practice, HRM research, relevance and rigour, research-practice gap

1 | INTRODUCTION

The research-practice gap has been an ongoing debate in applied fields, especially in general management, for over 2 decades (e.g., Tkachenko et al., 2017; Van de Ven & Johnson, 2006). However, efforts to bridge this gap are failing and it remains a 'grand challenge' for [HR] management research (Banks et al., 2016). While (some) progress has been made, particularly in the general management field, and factors have been identified as inhibitors of management research relevance, this is mostly focused on the early stages of research (Guerci et al., 2019), and less so on the publishing stage. In this article we adopt a complementary view by engaging in a direct conversation with this debate,

Practitioner notes

What is currently known?

- There is an ongoing research-practice gap in human resource management (HRM).
- Articles in HRM have stressed the need for more relevance of HRM research to practice.

What this paper adds?

- Despite big advances in HRM research, the benefits do not always reach practitioners.
- There is a limited focus of academic publications on practical implications.
- We inspire discussions and research that can contribute to solving practical problems.

The implications for practitioners

- Empirical work should offer a greater blend of theoretical and practical contributions and receive equal attention during peer-review.
- Journals should include practitioners on editorial advisory boards to improve the content of practical implications.
- All empirical articles should include practical implications (over 5% of total wordcount), a separate open-access practitioner synopsis and practitioner-focussed keywords.
- Practical implications that solely raise awareness or use verbose language without considering implementation should be avoided.

integrating what we know about the early stages, while focussing on the final stage (writing, reviewing, editing), that is, the publishing process. Although the issue of relevance is a problem at all stages of the research process, we consider the final stage to be of high importance as it is the publication that has the potential to influence practitioners. Even when studies have addressed the relevance problem during the early stages, there is a risk that their full impact is not realised as their practical implications are often lost during the publication process. Interestingly, this stage has been largely overlooked within the research-practice gap debate.

The debate adopts a partial view of HRM research; the focus is more on managerial implications and organisational performance and less so on other actors. We argue that the social aim of HRM research, based on its inherently applied nature, should be on the practical aspects of work, relevant not only to HR practitioners but also to other stakeholders involved in people management (e.g., employees, unionists, NGOs activists and policymakers). In this article, we use the word 'practitioner' to refer to all actors involved in the employment relationship. As academics in the HRM field, we are concerned with the management of people at work, with our discourse focussing on positively impacting organisations and people's working lives. Indeed, since its origins, the HRM discipline has focused on the added value that employees can bring to an organisation (Van Berkel et al., 2017). However, can we truly claim to make a difference if our contribution is not embedded in practice and policy? We challenge that despite advances in HRM research, the benefits do not reach stakeholders resulting in no tangible impact.

We acknowledge that not all academic work has (or should have) practical implications. There is empirical research that is purely theory testing, conceptual or critically inquisitive, however, an opportunity is lost when practical implications are not considered. Notably, we are not arguing against the importance of a theoretical contribution. However, we stress that there is an immediate need for more explicit practical relevance if HRM research is to become more impactful. In today's context, the presentation of research findings is increasingly important. For example, the public debate about the Covid-19 vaccine has unearthed many anti-scientific positions (Wardle & Singerman, 2021) which highlights the (in)effectiveness of the research community in publishing its results for public consumption. We

agree with Banks et al. (2016: p. 2205) that 'there is a moral and professional imperative to engage in rigorous study of phenomena that are relevant to those we serve'.

In this provocation article, we discuss the ongoing research-practice gap in HRM, what the implications are and what (if anything) might be done about it. Focussing on the publication process, we argue that HRM journals are failing to 'do the right thing' by not requiring authors to pay attention to communicating the research's practical implications. An extensive 'practical implications' section needs to be included in journal publications that provides an impetus to research relevant topics and closes the knowledge-translation gap. By doing so, we provoke and inspire debate that empirical research, as published in HRM academic journals, is a long way from impacting practice, and thus has little contribution to solving problems related to managing people.

To understand the fragile relationship between research and practice, we review the research-practice gap debate within the HRM and general management literatures. Consequently, we argue that journals are failing to provide an impetus to research relevant topics and close the knowledge-translation gap. We offer recommendations calling for HRM journals to address the research-practice deficit, with increased emphasis on practical implications.

2 | THE RESEARCH-PRACTICE GAP DEBATE

Presently, there is a divide between the research conducted by academics and the opportunity for research that is beneficial for both academia and practice (Harley, 2019; Zhang, et al., 2015). Indeed, articles in HRM have stressed the need for more practice-relevant research (e.g., Beer, 2019; Harley, 2015). Over a decade has passed since the *Academy of Management Journal* (2007) published their editors' forum on the research-practice gap in HRM (Rynes, 2007a), yet it seems more 'talk' rather than action was the result. Research is performed, and consumed, by academics, often never reaching practitioners. Publications are driven by theoretical and discipline-specific concerns, sometimes at the expense of both theoretical depth and practical relevance (Deadrick & Gibson, 2009; Guerci et al., 2019; Markoulli et al., 2017; Yeung, 2011). Deadrick and Gibson (2007: p. 138) talk about the identification of 'the real problem' being the barrier to overcoming the research-practice gap, but in over 10 years has this changed? Perhaps not, as still 'the greatest challenge facing management scholars is the presence, extent, and growth of the gap between research and practice' (Banks et al., 2016: p. 2205). While the editors' forum could be argued as being very US-focussed, it holds for the UK and other contexts (Guest, 2007). As we demonstrate, the research-practice gap remains a reality, even in *Human Resource Management Journal*, which previously had practitioners on the editorial advisory board. It could be argued that the US is better positioned in bridging the research-practice gap as practitioner-focussed publications, such as *Harvard Business Review* and *Sloan Business Review*, are held in high esteem. Notably, there are no HR specific publications that are held in high esteem by academics while being orientated towards practitioners.

2.1 | Rigour versus relevance

The research-practice gap debate is dominated by a discussion of whether academic research should emphasise practical relevance, scientific rigour, or both (Paterson et al., 2018). Furthermore, the extant literature has recognised several factors as inhibitors of (management) research relevance, at both institutional and individual levels, though neither are mutually exclusive. For example, the growing institutional pressure on academics to increase the number of publications in high-quality journals shows the 'disconnect between what is rewarded in terms of career success and the apparent desire of many leaders of business schools to demonstrate relevance' (Harley, 2019: p. 288).

Seen as a dichotomy, research that strives for rigour emphasises the general over the specific and research that strives for relevance emphasises the specific at the expense of the general. Bridging the gap would entail research that is high in both rigour and relevance (Aguinis et al., 2010; Aram & Salipante, 2003). However, the relevance of research

in the management domain (including HRM) remains in question (Banks et al., 2016), with suggestions that 'most of what management researchers do utterly fails to resonate with management practice' (Bansal et al., 2012: p. 73).

One view advocates that too frequently research is initiated by academics in response to theoretical gaps (rigour), however, research gaps as perceived by practitioners (relevance) are overlooked (Kulik, 2014; Markoulli et al., 2017; Tenhiälä et al., 2014). Equally, some argue that research is self-serving (Cohen, 2015) as research gaps perceived as important by academics may not ask questions that have practical implications (Grossman, 2009) – the 'lost before translation' problem (Shapiro et al., 2007: p. 249). The pursuit of publications in highly ranked journals, reinforced by business school targets (Vogel et al., 2017), results in researchers legitimising their work (Flickinger et al., 2014), rather than 'real-world' value being attributed by practitioners, extending the relevance deficit in HRM research. Yeung (2011: p. 452) was 'shocked to discover that many great HR principles we take for granted do not automatically take hold in the real world'. This argument is not new, for example, Bailey (2016: p. 2) contends that 'knowledge requires some practical real-world application that might lead to improved outcomes, rather than knowledge that has intrinsic value for its own sake'. The challenge is still present with limited potential for resolution if a change of approach does not happen at both institutional and individual levels.

Some academics (compare Kieser & Leiner, 2009) argue that rigour and relevance cannot be fully integrated, thus academics and practitioners cannot produce collaborative research that addresses the needs of both parties. An alternative view argues that a collaborative approach, that is, a science of practice based on collaborative relationships, rigour, reflexivity, and relevance (Shani & Coghlan, 2014), can lead to better research outcomes through enhanced organisational understanding (Bartunek & Rynes, 2014). Thus, both parties benefit from collaboration rather than acting alone. Furthermore, if academics and knowledge institutions are not striving for relevance (and rigour), specifically in the field of HRM, for whom are we creating this knowledge?

2.2 | Engaging practitioners

The conflict between rigour and relevance has led to practitioner disengagement with academic research (Guest, 2007). It has been recognised that 'practitioners are not likely to go to academics to ask for help or to solve their HR problems, nor do they read academic journals, or seek out other ways to gather information or collaborate with the academic community' (Tenhiälä et al., 2014: p. 194). This deficit of unity is confirmed by a lack of relationship between practical relevance and article citations (Flickinger et al., 2014). Arguably, it could be perceived as arrogant of academics to assume that practitioners readily and widely engage with empirical work published in peer-reviewed journals of high quality. Particularly, as there is a lack of coherence and agreement in the knowledge that is disseminated to practitioners both within and outside of formal education (Tourish & Willmott, 2015). The loss of unity has led to a call for collaboration between academics and practitioners to address future HR challenges (Cohen, 2015; Yeung, 2011) that sadly remains largely unanswered.

Practitioners are usually problem-orientated, and alert to information they can use to develop solutions or improve the ways they work (Gelade, 2006). To bridge the gap, it has been argued that HR practitioners should be using scientific research to improve organisational decision making (Rousseau & Barends, 2011; Tenhiälä et al., 2014). However, it is widely recognised that this is not the case (Lawler, 2007). Indeed, often they do not utilise evidence-based suggestions proffered by academics and institutions, in favour of consultancy-based 'easy-to-swallow' options (Dundon & Rafferty, 2018). This preference presents an additional obstacle for academics to traverse the research-practice divide. However, it is an oversimplification to assume practitioners are short-term focussed. Most practitioners are time-poor (Gelade, 2006; Grossman, 2009) and have limited access to financial and other resources to enact changes, triggering the pursuit of 'low hanging fruit' to demonstrate the value of their work. Many practitioners' workloads are dictated by the volume of 'firefighting' operational issues amplified by growing global uncertainty, thus limited time is available to concentrate on translating empirical research into their work contexts. The reality of external market conditions, for example, Brexit and other global issues, such as the Covid-19 pandemic, force HR into a reactive

position. One of the biggest challenges in the corporate setting is a 'messy' and 'ambiguous' landscape, influenced by many competing forces, priorities, and organisational heritages rather than clearly and rigorously aligned HR theories (Yeung, 2011). Unless useful publications can be easily accessed, understood, and contextually translated, empirical findings will continue to be unheeded—the 'lost in translation' problem (Shapiro et al., 2007: p. 249).

Academics are not presenting scientific research in a way, that is, accessible and usable for practitioners, preferring knowledge production over translation and dissemination (Van de Ven & Johnson, 2006). While academics might hope their research is practically relevant, to focus on this would be counterproductive in career terms given the institutional drive for production (Harley, 2019). As a result, many academics overlook the importance of drawing practical conclusions from their research in their articles (Gelade, 2006). The increasing institutional pressure to publish forces academics into a position of focussing on what is convenient, rather than what is necessary (Cohen, 2015). While other fields of management are inventing new and creative solutions, such as the use of design science empirical research methodologies in the *Journal of Operations Management* (Browning & de Treville, 2018), these appear to be ignored within HRM research.

2.3 | The role of journals in knowledge dissemination

While we recognise that there are guidelines that consider how to frame practical relevance at the very early stages of research, this is not the case for the final stage (writing, reviewing, editing) that is the publishing process. Some focus has been given to the writing stage specifically on how to construct practical implications (Aguinis et al., 2010; Bartunek & Rynes, 2010; Simsek et al., 2018), however the problem persists, especially in HRM. Within this debate, the role of journals and how they choose to disseminate knowledge is important yet largely ignored. Many higher-ranking journals favour rigorous methods which may over-complicate problems that can appear trivial to practitioners (Parkhe, 1993), and detract the value of scholarship from practical relevance (Adler & Harzing, 2009). This approach disadvantages journals that focus on practitioners' areas of interest, and may contribute to a wider debasement of academic culture whereby business schools and academics are encouraged to over-focus on issues of status and league table positioning for their own sake, rather than address important issues of concern to our wider society' (Tourish & Willmott, 2015: p. 37).

Usually 'in the "best journals" strong theory has replaced practical significance' as the major publication criterion, limiting the research usefulness as a basis to identifying how dedicated high-ranking publications are to practicality (DeNisi et al., 2014: p. 229). We are not arguing that strength in rigour is at the expense of relevance, rather that the demand journals place on academics to demonstrate rigour detracts from the emphasis placed on relevance. Consequently, less attention is paid to communicating the relevance that many studies bring, and thus their potential impact is missed. Concurrently, research published in academic journals contributes to this gap by failing to reach practitioners. More worryingly, practitioner journals, responsible for knowledge translation, barely cover topics that HRM researchers believe to be among their most important findings (Rynes et al., 2007).

High-ranking journals are more likely to publish articles featuring complex quantitative methods as they receive more citations (Vogel et al., 2017). However, practical relevance does not impact citation frequency and therefore becomes a less important consideration for academics pursuing publication (Judge et al., 2007). Thus, theory is favoured above practical relevance in highly ranked journals (McKinnon, 2013). To be published in top academic journals, an article needs to be methodologically sound and covering all the issues raised by peer-review. However, reviewers typically focus on methodology and theory but not on practical application (Cohen, 2007). As we demonstrate, most academic articles include a few sentences or paragraphs, at most, discussing practical application. Why then would a practitioner read scholarly journals such as *Human Resource Management Journal* or *Human Resource Management* regularly?

The research-practice gap is also sustained due to the competition for status, which leads to research uniformity and practical irrelevance (Harmon, 2006). We often see arguments being recycled in publications, following the

increasingly formalistic approach being demanded by top journals (Grey, 2010). To meet academic quality standards and journals' requirements, the emphasis is on advancing knowledge rather than impacting practice (Cascio, 2007). Nevertheless, as Guest (2007: pp. 1024–1025) argues, 'academics [and institutions] may need to pay strong attention to the perspective of practitioners and to be more responsive to their needs. If we cannot engage their interest, no amount of high-quality research will make much difference'. This argument highlights the lost opportunity for HRM research to create an impact in practice and society.

One can argue that academic journals need not bother with the translation of empirical research into practical responses as other actors are involved in this process, such as consultants and practitioner publications (e.g. *People Management*, *HR Magazine*). However, while such outlets provide summaries of some current empirical research and can be a useful communication tool between academics and practitioners, not all research can be published through these mediums. Third party translation cannot cover the wealth of knowledge captured in academic journal publications, reiterating the importance for practitioners to access the original empirical research most aligned with their own needs.

Some steps, albeit few, have been taken to tackle the lack of consideration for practical application, such as dedicated practical implications sections (Bartunek & Rynes, 2010) and bridging journals (e.g., *Harvard Business Review*). However, these solutions have not addressed the issue and academic journals remain inaccessible to practitioners (Kieser et al., 2015). As we show in this provocation article, the limited attention given to practical implications suggests that the importance of empirical research for practitioners is an afterthought rather than core to research design and inquiry.

2.4 | HRM journals' (lack of) focus on practical implications

The role of academic journals has largely been ignored in the research-practice gap debate, particularly in terms of knowledge dissemination. To determine the (un)importance that journals place on practitioner relevance, we reviewed all empirical articles which were published in 2018 in journals from the 'Human Resource Management and Employment Studies' field, rated in the 2018 Academic Journal Guide (AJG) as '3' and '4'. We chose not to include conceptual articles because their focus is on contribution to theory with less practical applicability. We decided to exclude *Industrial Law Journal* as the nature of the journal and its focus is on enacted legislation and law reform proposals. The AJG indicates the quality of business and management academic journals and is thus a useful benchmark. The journals considered to be high ranking in the AJG correspond to other quality guides, such as the Australian Business Deans Council and Scientific Journal Rankings (see Appendix A).

Following Flickinger et al. (2014), we conducted a wordcount of the practical implications as an indication of each article's focus. In addition, we examined the journals' overview and aims to determine the importance placed on practical orientation (Table 1). By adopting this approach, we argue that highly ranked journals' demands deter academics from focussing on the practical implications of empirical work. For example, the AJG only emphasises practitioner orientation for publications that are rated as '2', reflecting a lower perception of quality for empirical articles more focused on practical implications.

We used Table 1 as a sampling tool to identify the articles in which we would expect to see consideration for practical implications based on the journals' overview and aims. Four out of the eleven journals in the 'Human Resource Management and Employment Studies' field were excluded, namely *Industrial Relations Journal*; *New Technology, Work and Employment*; *Work and Occupations*; and *Work, Employment and Society*, as there was no claim to practical relevance.¹ As HRM is an inherently applied field, all journals should consider practical importance within their aims. However, as these journals do not currently include such aims, it was inappropriate to include them in this review.

For each article, where there was a dedicated practical implications section or heading, we included the wordcount of the entire section for the percentage calculation. Where an article did not have a clear section, we coded the relevant wording relating to practical implications from the discussion and conclusion sections. Practitioners are interested in quickly locating information relevant to their immediate problems, and journal articles, especially ones

TABLE 1 Journal overview and aims extracts

Journal	Journal claims
<i>British Journal of Industrial Relations</i>	...a journal of work and employment relations, with a focus on the institutions, policies, and practices associated with these relations and their implications for matters of economy and society .
<i>Economic and Industrial Democracy</i>	... explores the new labour market, new work processes, as well as organisational aspects regarding working life and its policy implications .
<i>European Journal of Industrial Relations</i>	...theoretical and practical implications ... make their work accessible to those practically engaged in industrial relations, and where possible show the practical significance of their analysis... the integration of theory and practice... welcomes reflective contributions from practitioners ...
<i>Human Resource Management</i>	Bridging research and practice , this is the premier journal for Deadrick and Gibson leaders... new approaches to the human resource management field... a direct link to the HR function and/or HR practices .
<i>Human Resource Management Journal</i>	...promote the understanding of HRM to academics and practicing managers ...for everyone involved in personnel, training and human resource management...
<i>Industrial Relations Journal</i>	...focusing on the changing nature, forms and regulation of the employment relationship... further understanding of industrial relations, labour markets, and the organisation and future of work...contemporary analysis of state, capital and labour relations in a period of crisis and institutional flux.
<i>Industrial Relations: A Journal of Economy and Society</i>	...multidisciplinary focus on the implications of change for business, government and workers.
<i>International Journal of Human Resource Management</i>	...for HRM scholars and professionals worldwide...
<i>New Technology, Work and Employment</i>	...analysis of the changing contours of technological and organisational systems and processes in order to encourage an enhanced and critical understanding of the dimensions of technological change in the workplace and in employment more generally... the primary focus on critical and non-managerial approaches to the subject... changing nature of new technology and workplace and employment relations... conceptual debate firmly rooted in analysis of current practices and sociotechnical change.
<i>Work and Occupations</i>	... research on the human dynamics of the workplace, employment, and society from an international, interdisciplinary perspective...examining international approaches to work-related issues as well as insights from scholars in a variety of fields...
<i>Work, Employment and Society</i>	... all aspects of work, employment and unemployment and their connections with wider social processes and social structures...

without a dedicated section, often bury this information under a wealth of technical detail. Thus, we saw it as pointless to check the whole article for practical implications. We focused on the discussion and conclusion whenever a dedicated section was not present as 'the introduction and discussion sections typically contain the substantive information of most interest to practitioners' (Gelade, 2006: p. 157), and the introduction typically mentions the same key points

as the discussion (often in less detail). To code any practical implications within the discussion and conclusion sections we looked for wording that indicated suggestions and recommendations for stakeholders.

We also calculated the wordcount dedicated to practical implications as a percentage of each article's total wordcount to indicate the importance placed on practice (Table 2).

The results show that *Human Resource Management* journal has, on average, the highest proportion of wordcount focussed on practical implications and the highest number of articles that include a specific practical implications section. This focus on practical implications reflects the journal's claim to 'bridge the gap' between research and practice. Despite having the highest proportion, it remains problematic and disappointing that so little of each article is dedicated to practitioners. More concerningly, our coding shows that only one of the seven journals reviewed (including the highest-ranking journal) focused more than 5% of the total wordcount on practical implications.

In three of the seven journals, none of the articles reviewed contained a section specific to practitioners. In these cases, this lack of practical consideration directly contradicts the journals' claims to inform practice (see Table 1). For example, the *European Journal of Industrial Relations* states that it is:

essential reading for both academics and practitioners concerned with current and emergent trends in industrial and employment relations in Europe and elsewhere

However, none of its published articles in 2018 had a dedicated section, and practical implications 'hidden' in the articles accounted for 1.02% of the overall wordcount. Unfortunately, this picture is not much better for the other journals, as Table 2 highlights. Bailey (2016: p. 2) necessitates that the presentation and language of scientific research should be 'meaningful and comprehensible to a practitioner audience'. Our review reveals a tick-box approach to practical implications in most articles, where the 'so-what' question for practitioners is rarely addressed and the non-academic/stakeholder audience remains an afterthought. Where a dedicated practical implications section exists, there are a few laudable examples with explicit suggestions (e.g., Baum & Überschaer, 2018). Unfortunately, in most articles, the section remains too vague to be useful. Where practical implications are found in the discussion and/or conclusion sections, these are usually obscure and implicit. Too often practical implications are positioned as 'raising awareness' without any explicit instructions. Some recommendations are seemingly impossible and offer no considerations to

TABLE 2 Journal review summary

Journal	AJG 2018; ABDC; SJR	Total articles reviewed	# With dedicated section	'Practical implications' as % of WC	% Articles with dedicated section
British Journal of Industrial Relations	4; A*; 1.159	29	0	1.74%	0.00%
Economic and Industrial Democracy	3; A; 0.854	25	1	0.55%	4.00%
European Journal of Industrial Relations	3; A; 0.411	21	0	1.02%	0.00%
Human Resource Management	4; A*; 1.64	87	63	7.79%	72.41%
Human Resource Management Journal	4; A; 2.357	35	19	4.02%	54.29%
Industrial Relations: A Journal of Economy and Society	4; A*; -	18	0	0.24%	0.00%
International Journal of Human Resource Management	3; A; 1.141	107	59	4.22%	55.14%

Note: The '**' indicates Journals of Distinction that are recognised world-wide as exemplars of excellence. Abbreviation: AJG, Academic Journal Guide.

the practical aspects of implementation (e.g., time and cost). Many practical implications use unintelligible terms that are meaningless to practitioners, for example, 'sensitize all involved parties', 'unobtrusive nonpaternalistic nature' or 'force field of service'.

Our review reveals that many articles address contemporary topics through high-level rigorous research and have exceptional theoretical contributions. However, despite the tremendous potential for impact, this unfortunately rarely materialises. For example, the work of Doerflinger and Pulignano (2018) in *Economic and Industrial Democracy*, investigates the effects of crisis-related collective bargaining on unions' capacity to protect different contractual groups of workers. Despite the insightful findings on 'some of the nuances across countries, companies and workplaces, as well as different effects on permanent and temporary workers' (ibid: p. 147), the authors do not offer unions explicit suggestions on how to increase their capacity to protect workers. Similarly, Skorupińska (2018), in the *European Journal of Industrial Relations*, examines the failure of Polish works councils to promote social dialogue and be strong institutions of employee participation. While the author investigates the reasons behind this failure, there are no explicit suggestions on how the insights from this research can be used to help works councils become successful mechanisms of employee voice. This oversight by authors and journals is truly a lost opportunity for empirical work to influence practice and working lives. We are now at a point where HR research cannot afford many more lost opportunities.

2.5 | Limitations and future research

There are clear limitations to our approach, however, our intention is to provoke a debate that can reignite action. We acknowledge that there are highly influential academics, for example, Professors Dave Ulrich, David Guest and John Purcell, whose work attracts a practitioner audience. Furthermore, some empirical articles (e.g., those positioned to address specific industrial relations issues within a case study context), are problem-focussed and embedded in practice, and thus explicit practitioner implications are unwarranted. Therefore, in light of the intent and context, our approach considering wordcount is useful.

In this article, we have used the term 'practitioners' to include all stakeholders involved in people management (e.g., employees, unionists, NGOs activists and policymakers). It is unclear to whom HRM scholars address the practical implications of their research. We suspect that most HRM scholars consider HR managers and professionals as their audience. Thus, future research could focus on content analysis to explore which actors HRM scholars address when developing the implications of their publications.

Lastly, while the focus of this article is on improving practical relevance in the final stages of research, it may be too late if authors only act during those final phases.

3 | RECOMMENDATIONS

We offer seven recommendations: (i) HRM academics should draw on wider management ideas and debates; (ii) improvement to the content of practical implications (iii) journal-practitioners collaboration; (iv) dedicated practical implications in every empirical article, with supporting guidance; (v) open-access practitioner synopsis; (vi) practitioner-focussed keywords; and, (vii) practical implications and theoretical contributions receiving equal reviewer attention.

The extant literature has called for remedial action (Bartunek & Rynes, 2010), albeit limited action has been taken, and the role of academic journals in this action is largely ignored. One purpose of HRM research is to improve working lives, however, the most notable consequence of the research-practice gap, especially during the Covid-19 pandemic, is that working lives appear more vulnerable than ever, with mental health, well-being and productivity issues ever more prevalent. There is a risk that the boundaries of the research-practice gap are diverging further to cause a canyon. The current situation appears dire and practitioners cannot rely on academia for help. One suggestion to increase

practical relevance is to focus on understanding practitioner needs (Rynes, 2007b). However, practitioners find academic research to be irrelevant to their needs, difficult to understand (Tourish, 2019), and inaccessible. We are not suggesting that as academics we should stop writing about practical implications, on the contrary, we need to invest in making academic publications more interesting for practitioners.

This article provokes debate about how to bridge the research-practice gap from two perspectives. Firstly, it offers recommendations for authors to research relevant topics, thus addressing the knowledge production, rigour-relevance, problem. Secondly, it calls for editors and journals to address the issue of knowledge translation to increase practitioner engagement.

3.1 | Recommendations for authors

Calls for empirical examples that show how academic-practitioner collaborations generate theoretical and practical contributions in the HRM field (Guerci et al., 2019; Radaelli et al., 2014; Zhang et al., 2015) remain unanswered. Furthermore, examples of empirical articles based on academic-practitioner collaborations are scarce. An exception is *Human Resource Management Journal's* call for papers for a special issue on 'Relevant, rigorous and reflective knowledge creation in HRM through scholar-stakeholder collaborative research' (Guerci et al., 2020). All HRM journals should follow this example more regularly.

Importantly, the HRM field does not exist in a vacuum; it is fully part of the broader field of management research. Yet, while there are new ideas and debates in the general management literature that would make sense in HRM, these are not 'imported' (Aguinis et al., 2010; Bartunek & Rynes, 2010; Simsek et al., 2018). Other management fields are inventing creative solutions, such as the use of design science empirical research methodologies in the *Journal of Operations Management* (Browning & de Treville, 2018), that are ignored within HRM; authors should consider applying such ideas in HRM research.

Authors should avoid practical implications that simply raise awareness or use unintelligible terms without considering implementation practicality. The following text is a fictitious example paraphrased from several of the weaker practical implications in our review:

To avoid gendered pay inequality, all actors should be made sensitive to the issues of pay differences and the relevance of training completion. The organisation should encourage marginalised employees to participate in training to the same extent as other groups.

Instead, a more relevant and easy-to-apply revision of these practical implications may be:

To increase pay equality several actions could be taken. Firstly, equal pay should be a board-level key performance indicator and a permanent agenda item. Secondly, all policies should be reviewed and changed to eliminate discretionary managerial decisions. Thirdly, train managers on equal pay and organisational policies. Fourthly, review training against policies, for example, ensure that training offerings align to flexible working practices. To maximise training attendance, this could form part of employees' performance and development objectives.

3.2 | Recommendations for editors and journals

To avoid practical irrelevance, academic journals and institutions should afford greater voice to practitioners and dismantle the barriers between industry and academia. To offer greater insight into an article's practical relevance, practitioners could be included in editorial advisory boards and/or act as reviewers for empirical articles. These measures

may alleviate practitioners' disengagement from academic work and offer a partnered approach to identifying and addressing industry-important HR issues while contributing to knowledge.

Our review revealed numerous articles that were of high scholarly quality and practical relevance, but inaccessible to practitioners (a truly lost opportunity). It can be confidently assumed that most practitioners would be disinclined to read academic articles in full (Gelade, 2006) but search for practical implications instead. Therefore, if the practical implications are not immediately apparent, practitioners may not find the article useful. Thus, all high-ranking journals that claim practical relevance should make practical implications more extensive, as a dedicated section within the article (at least 5% of the text) and a feature of every empirical publication. To support the development of stronger implications for practice, journals should extend their guidance for authors to provide advice on crafting clear and relevant practical implications (Simsek et al., 2018). Further, we call for all journals within HRM to include practical relevance as part of their overview and aims; HR research only matters if it operates in Pasteur's quadrant (Tushman & O'Reilly, 2007).

Alternatively, to accommodate time-poor practitioners, academic journals can add a more 'user-friendly' approach to online published articles. For example, empirical articles can offer a separate 'relevance' piece, that is, an open-access, practitioner-focussed synopsis of findings and practicality alongside the abstract. For better search results, these separate pieces should be accompanied by practitioner-focussed keywords.

Greater attention needs to be paid to the level of impact that research has on practice. Currently, a question that would determine whether an article is published or not is its contribution to knowledge rather than its impact to practice. To increase focus on impact, academic journals, when determining an empirical article's value, should consider its relevance, applicability, and practical contribution. When the author's aim is to publish, it is tempting to address the academics (i.e., the referees) at the expense of the practitioners. An editorial policy encouraging referees to assess the practical relevance of contributions can remind authors to address both elements of the readership (Gelade, 2006). If practical implications are not included in the article, authors need to justify their omission to the editors. This suggestion could be strengthened if HR journals publicly assert in their mission statements their aim to provide practical implications.

4 | CONCLUSION

In this provocation article, we argued that HRM research does not currently impact practice and that authors and academic journals need to re-examine their relationship with HR practice. We focussed on the practical importance of HRM and how the intellectual debates (insufficiently) transcend into practice. While the divergence between academia and practice is not a new debate (DeNisi et al., 2014), it has lost traction in recent years and thus warrants revival. We contribute to the recent debates about the potential demise of HRM (Dundon & Rafferty, 2018) by considering the role of academic publications. We argued that a factor contributing to this demise of HRM [research] is academic journals' 'distance' from practice.

We challenged thinking on how empirical research is presented in high ranking journals. As academics, we base our ideas on previous research and a potential knowledge gap, but how do we identify and address the gaps in practice to engage practitioners' interests and needs? Despite efforts to encourage evidence-based HR practitioners (Rousseau & Barends, 2011), there is little evidence of significant change. We recognise that access to people and organisations can be challenging for academics, so we call for collaboration that enables access to conduct meaningful research that addresses practitioners' needs. In satisfying theoretical and discipline-specific requirements, academics risk disengaging practitioners in identifying 'the real problem' (Guerci et al., 2019). Presenting 'solutions' emerging from self-indulgent research is not enough. To achieve greater impact, a stronger interface between theory creation and corporate application is necessary (Yeung, 2011).

We encourage a more user-friendly approach in presenting empirical publications to increase accessibility and usefulness for practitioners. Empirical work should offer a greater blend between theoretical and practical contributions,

weighted towards practical implications. We emphasise previous arguments that the research-practice gap is exacerbated by academic institutions, and not individuals (DeNisi et al., 2014) and call all HRM journals to increase the importance of their empirical publications' practical implications. Given the accessibility of online resources, academics and journals, must spearhead a change of approach to increase the attractiveness of articles to practitioners, reduce the gap, and create opportunities for impact.

The current environment (i.e., Covid-19 and economic crisis) and its consequences on work and employment has increased the urgency to narrow the gap. As organisations and individuals adapt to uncertainty, research can offer insights to help stakeholders manage crises and ease the severe economic and social challenges. As practitioners and academics, we must unite in our pursuit of forefronting the importance of people management to economic, political, and social concerns. Let us renew our efforts to realign our interests, as it is no longer a question of 'how do we bridge the gap?', but 'how do we bridge the canyon?'

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to thank two distinct sets of important contributors to this paper. First, we would like to acknowledge the expertise of our reviewers and the editor. Their insight and detailed guidance were invaluable to the paper's final composition. Second, we say to Professors Adrian Wilkinson and Tony Dundon that we greatly appreciate all your support and we look forward to bothering you again.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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ENDNOTE

¹ If you are interested in the review results regarding those journals please see Appendix B.

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How to cite this article: Kougiannou, N. K., & Ridgway, M. (2022). How is human resource management research (not) helping practice? In defence of practical implications. *Human Resource Management Journal*, 32(2), 470–484. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1748-8583.12414>

APPENDIX A: List of journal ranking guides

ISSN	Journal	AJG 2018 4*-1	ABDC 2019 A*-C	Hceres 2020 A-C	SJR	H Index	WoS impact factor
0007-1080	<i>British Journal of Industrial Relations</i>	4	A*	A	1.159	67	2.066
0143-831X	<i>Economic and Industrial Democracy</i>	3	A	B	0.854	37	2.286
0954-5395	<i>European Journal of Industrial Relations</i>	3	A	B	0.411	41	0.796
0090-4848	<i>Human Resource Management (USA)</i>	4	A*	A	1.64	87	2.476
0954-539	<i>Human Resource Management Journal (UK)</i>	4	A	A	2.357	72	3.816
0019-8692	<i>Industrial Relations Journal</i>	3	A				1.719
0019-8676	<i>Industrial Relations: a Journal of Economy and Society</i>	4	A*	A			1.581
0958-5192	<i>International Journal of Human Resource Management</i>	3	A	A	1.263	107	3.04
0268-1072	<i>New Technology, Work and Employment</i>	3	A		1.141	41	3.219
0730-8884	<i>Work and Occupations</i>	3	A	B	2.547	63	2.875
0950-0170	<i>Work, Employment and Society</i>	4	A	A	1.808	75	3.171

APPENDIX B: Excluded journals—review summary

Journal	AJG 2018; ABDC; SJR	Total articles reviewed	# With dedicated section	'Practical implications' as % of WC	% Articles with dedicated section
<i>Industrial Relations Journal</i>	3; A; -	27	1	1.41%	3.70%
<i>New Technology, Work & Employment</i>	3; A; 1.141	14	0	1.97%	0.00%
<i>Work and Occupations</i>	3; A; 2.547	15	2	1.67%	13.33%
<i>Work, Employment and Society</i>	4; A; 1.808	53	0	0.48%	0.00%

Abbreviation: AJG, Academic Journal Guide.