

10 lessons in HR decision-making from the Covid-19 crisis

14 May 2020 By Rob Briner

As HR moves towards greater adoption of evidence-based practice, Rob Briner looks at what it can learn from how politicians are currently using scientific advice



Has there ever before been a point in history when we've had such a strong appetite for (and easy access to) evidence? There have been daily briefings, constantly emerging scientific findings, and of course, an endless stream of sometimes bewildering charts, graphs, figures and diagrams depicting the size and spread of the pandemic.

As someone interested in how we can make better use of all types of evidence to make better-informed practice decisions, I've been completely fascinated by how the general public and media have engaged critically with the process of questioning the reliability of this information.

One reason for my fascination is the striking similarity between the challenges that face our governments in using evidence to manage the crisis, and the challenges any of us might face trying to use evidence in any context. As HR moves towards a more explicit adoption of evidence-based practice, what lessons can we as a profession learn from observing how political decision makers are using evidence?

It's all about using multiple sources of evidence

Scientific evidence is not, by itself, enough. The same is true for stakeholder views, organisational data, professional expertise or any other source of evidence. It is only by looking across a range of sources and types of evidence that we can start to build up a more complete evidence picture.

There's always time to collect and use evidence

One objection I often hear to evidence-based practice is that organisations need to move fast and must prioritise action over analysis. But we need both. Needing to act quickly, even in a crisis, doesn't mean there isn't also time to use evidence to make better decisions about which actions to take.

Get a handle on the problem before you start implementing solutions

The urge to do something - do anything - can sometimes direct attention and resources away from the essential work of understanding the nature of the problem and its dynamics. The better we understand the situation, the more likely it is our interventions will be effective.

Find out what's already known before collecting new information

The idea that we always need new studies and new data is tempting. This may be the case, but if we don't try first to find out what we already know (and don't know) then we won't know what new information, if any, we need. In the case of scientific evidence, this is done through systematic reviews of existing scientific findings.

Stop talking about 'the science'

When decision makers do try to incorporate scientific findings they often refer to 'the science' as though it is one, single, simple, stable, uncontested and unquestionable thing. Of course it isn't. Like any other source of evidence, the deeper we look into it the more we see nuance, complexity and contradiction - which it is a mistake to ignore.

Stop talking about being guided by or following science

These expressions are usually deployed as thought-terminating clichés. It's fine to be guided by or to follow science, but simply saying that is not enough. We need

transparency. Which science? How precisely is it guiding actions? What was the process?

Be very wary of over-invested enthusiasts

Being interested in science is great. Being obsessed or bewitched by particular types of science, scientific approaches or scientific findings is a dangerous form of bias. Neuroscience, behavioural science and nudge, for example, have their place but none should be placed on a pedestal. It's vital to remain critical and not confuse how much you like or know about a certain area of science with its value or relevance to the problem at hand.

Don't stop being sceptical

Our cognitive biases don't have an off switch. This is one reason why we need to keep asking questions to nurture constructive doubt about our own and others' perceptions of the evidence. As lawyer-turned-economist-turned-actor-turned-political blogger Alex Andreou puts it, scepticism is a tool of reason, not of denial. It's important to remember that our biases not only distort information but cause important information to become hidden in plain sight.

Don't make comparisons unless you are fairly certain they're valid

Comparing one country or company to another is appealing as it seems to provide useful insight. We may use others as benchmarks to judge our own performance or copy what those who are successful are doing. But unless you have a huge amount of knowledge, such comparisons will be misleading rather than helpful.

If getting hold of evidence is difficult now, remember there will be a next time

For many of us, getting hold of relevant and reliable evidence is a real struggle. This time we may just have to make the best use of whatever information we have to hand. But what about next time? What systems can we put in place to ensure we have better access to the evidence we need in future?

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