

# THE ROLE OF WORK AND ORGANIZATIONAL PSYCHOLOGY FOR WORKPLACE INNOVATION PRACTICE: FROM SHORT-SIGHTEDNESS TO EAGLE VIEW

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## Abstract

This paper is premised on the observation that the potential of Work and Organizational (WO) Psychologists to successfully implement workplace innovation (WPI) practices and, in turn, improve the quality of work and organizational performance is greatly underused. One reason for this is that WPI practice often adopts a more specialised approach and single discipline focus rather than an integrated perspective. An integrated approach would imply understanding WPI from the strategy, structure, and culture perspectives. We outline ways in which WPI practice can appreciate and use the potential of WO psychology as well as how WO Psychologists can broaden their focus and strengthen their contribution to WPI practice.

## Introduction

The increasing adoption and implementation of workplace innovation (WPI) practices in business organizations poses a number of challenges for the role of Work and Organizational (WO) Psychologists in WPI. Here, by Work and Organizational Psychologists we refer to researchers and practitioners in the fields of occupational psychology, occupational health psychology, industrial and organizational psychology, and cognate areas, whereas we use the term WPI to refer to innovations in deploying human talent and organising work processes that should result in good work and better performance. WPI, as explained in more detail later, is renewal through deploying human talents and organizational design, aiming at both better performance and better jobs. The implications of WPI practice for WO Psychologists are the need to find synergy in people and organizational issues on the one hand, and the need to communicate the value and potential of WPI to stakeholders with different backgrounds, on the other. Challenges that emerge from the meeting of WO psychology and WPI practice include, for example, WO Psychologists being called to provide rigorous evidence for relevant practice, often having to move between increasingly varied roles as both reflective practitioners and action researchers, and being required to communicate with diverse groups of stakeholders with different agendas and understandings. Unless such challenges are successfully

addressed, they can become barriers for the successful utilisation of WO psychological knowledge in the implementation of WPI practice.

These challenges are not unique to the field. Rather, they reflect a long-standing concern about a practitioner-researcher divide in WO psychology and in business and management (e.g., Anderson, 2005; Anderson, Herriott, & Hodgkinson, 2001). The practitioner-researcher divide denotes the phenomenon of practitioners and researchers operating in isolation from each other: research advancements are often ignored by practitioners and practical problems are often ignored in research. More broadly, a practitioner-researcher divide is also afflicting a range of fields including personnel selection (Anderson, 2005), nursing practice (Arber, 2006), education practice (Fraser, 1997), design (Wampler, 2010), occupational health and safety (Zanko & Dawson, 2012), and even foreign policy (Nye, 2008). Others too have called for management scholars to place practice and the pragmatic concerns of practitioners on their agenda (Zanko & Dawson, 2012). Nevertheless, a recent upsurge in the solutions proposed to bridge this divide encourages optimism about the chances of success for using WO psychology to support WPI practice.

In this paper, we discuss how the practitioner-researcher challenges for WO Psychologists are framed within WPI practice. We then identify a range of ways in which WO Psychologists can demonstrate the value of the field to WPI and examine ways in which the role of WO Psychologists can be strengthened for successful WPI practice. By examining the transaction between WO psychology and WPI practice, with this position paper we address the question “what is the role of work and organizational Psychologists for workplace innovation practice?”. To achieve this, we draw from a range of literatures, such as WO psychology, WPI, Human Resource Management (HRM), and industrial relations, taking a necessarily integrative and critical rather than a systematic approach.

### **What challenges is WO psychology called to deal with in WPI practice?**

WPI practice poses unique challenges for WO psychology and, at the same time, WO psychology can offer opportunities for bolstering WPI practice. In practice, there is a risk for the practitioner-researcher divide to be exacerbated unless we can identify ways for the two fields to converge. Here, we discuss the meaning and practice of WPI and what challenges this context poses for WO psychology research and practice.

The applied definition of workplace innovation (WPI) that we employ here is that of: “*developed and implemented practice or combination of practices that structurally (structure orientation or a focus on division of labour) and/or culturally (culture orientation or a focus on empowerment) enable employees to participate in organizational change and renewal to improve quality of working life and organizational performance*” (Oeij et al., 2015, p. 8, 14).

Importantly, the *structure-* and *culture-oriented WPI practices* are part of a broader comprehensive organizational *strategy* that provides the framework for implementing WPI in the specific organizational context and with the available resources. The *structure orientation* contains practices that structure work organization and job design (De Sitter, Den Hertog & Dankbaar, 1997; Oeij et al., 2015). Structure-oriented practices can stimulate employee control and autonomy (De Sitter et al., 1997). These practices concern the division of labour, the division of controlling (or managing) and executing tasks, and providing employees with decision latitude or capacity for control. For instance, do employers allow employees a genuine say in organizational change initiatives by providing them with task autonomy and voice in decisions; or do they only offer a token to employee empowerment and employability by inviting ideas but not acting on them (Herriot, 2001)? Such an approach goes beyond HR-dominated

streams of practice (such as high performance work practices and high involvement work practices), because it is rooted in the choices made on how to design the production system. Hence, it goes beyond HR practices by supporting and improving the underlying causes of engagement and not merely softening the possible negative effects of non-engagement.

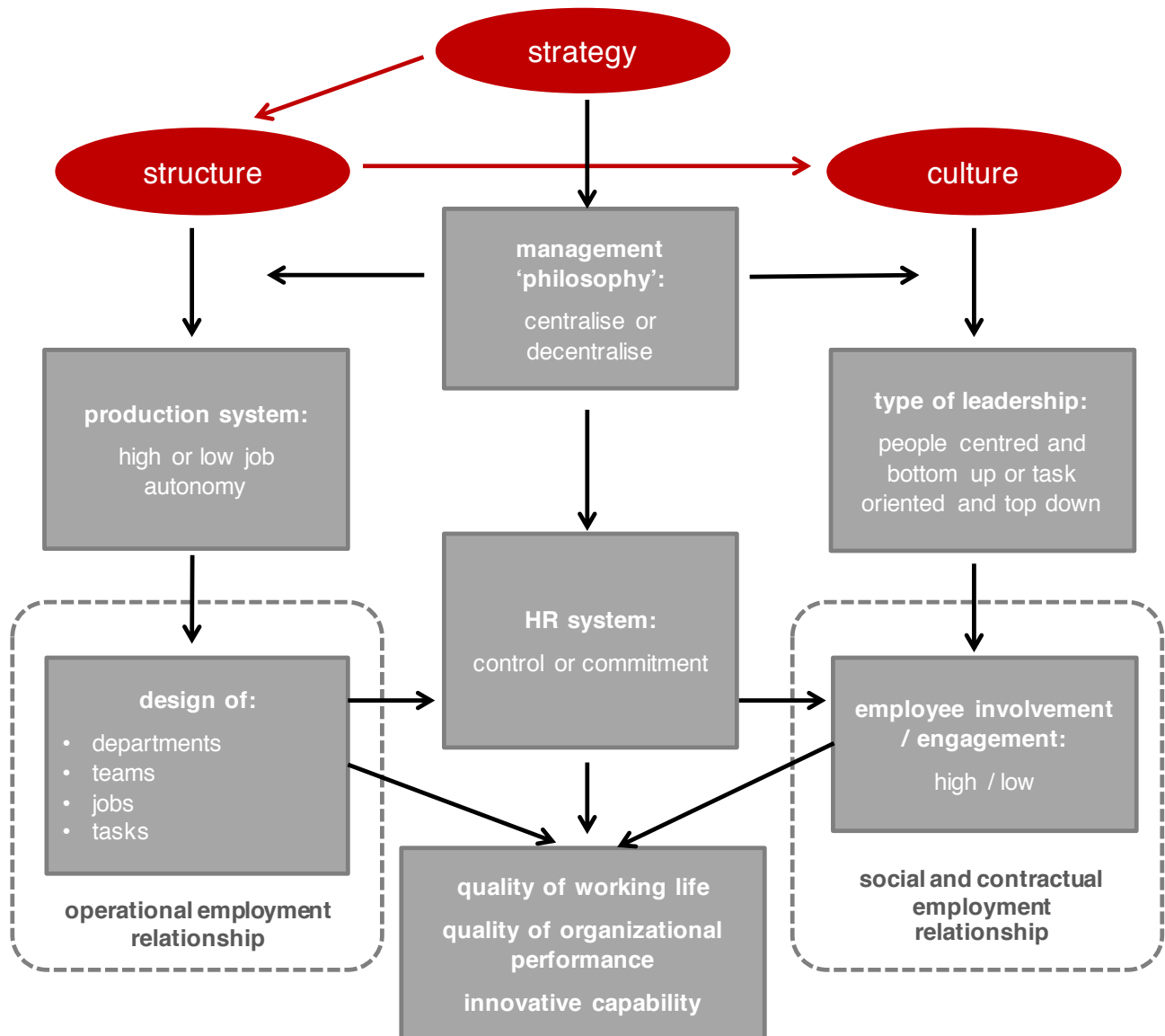
The *culture orientation*, on the other hand, includes practices that provide opportunities for employees to participate in various ways such as, for example, in organizational decision-making (Oeij et al., 2015). Participation is more than being listened to; rather, employees co-decide on the issues that concern them and affect their day-to-day work and well-being (Oeij et al., 2015). Participation is not limited to employees but also applies to employee representatives engaging in dialogue and collective bargaining. Culture-oriented practices can stimulate commitment and provide employees and employee representatives with voice (Totterdill & Exton, 2014). As such, not only do they allow for voice in contract negotiations and pay for performance decisions, but also consist of psychological rewards, such as appreciation, recognition and professional acknowledgement. Genuine commitment and voice find expression in 'formal' rewards and in the psychological contract and employee relations.

The practice of WPI poses four challenges that the field of WO psychology is in a very good position to address. First, in order to practice WPI successfully and reap the benefits associated with it, one needs to *look at the organization as a whole and consider the reciprocal effects of strategy, structure, and culture* (Howaldt, Oeij, Dhondt, & Fruytier, 2016). Although not uncontested, it was Chandler (1962) who coined the adage that structure follows strategy, to which we add that culture follows structure (see Figure 1). Strategy determines the design of the production of products or services, based on the central purpose of the organization. The evolving production system reflects a design built on a certain division of labour, which can be characterised in terms of high or low job autonomy, i.e., decentralised versus centralised. From here follows the nature of operational employment relationships (in particular, dealing with the degree of the division of managing and executing tasks and the splitting up of responsibilities and decision latitude in the working process), which is mirrored in the design of departments, teams, jobs, and tasks. Meanwhile, the management philosophy (i.e., centralised vs. decentralised) determines not only the production system, but also the type of HR system applied to support the production system. As such, the HR system can focus on either control or commitment. Third, strategy and structure set the boundaries for the organizational behaviour exhibited by leaders/managers and employees. A preference for centralised or decentralised production systems breeds a type of leadership that is either task-oriented or people-oriented (i.e., transactional and more top-down, and transformational and more bottom-up leadership, respectively), and lays foundations for employee engagement. Such behaviour is further stimulated or facilitated by the HR system. Ultimately, the HR system defines the social and contractual elements of the employment relationships and the features of the economic and psychological contract, described as employee involvement. Finally, strategy, structure, and culture together lead to a number of outcomes including quality of working life (autonomy, stress, motivation etc.), organizational performance (efficiency, effectiveness, customer satisfaction, market share, etc.), and innovative capability (resilience, creativity, resourcefulness, right to play, future proofing, etc.).

Figure 1 below displays this reasoning. The absence of a direct arrow from strategy to culture does not imply absence of a relationship between the two. Rather, it highlights the fact that managers design structures that stimulate certain behaviours. In other words, managers design organizations and, in turn, organizational design largely determines people's behaviour. In turn, behaviour and structures define the culture of the workplace itself. For example, people tend to

behave differently within a top-down/centralised structure, which reflects a control strategy, as opposed to a bottom-up/decentralised structure, which reflects a commitment strategy.

*Figure 1. Structure follows strategy, and culture follows structure*



WO Psychologists are in a good position to help understand the causal links among strategy, structure, and culture, which are too often overlooked (De Sitter et al., 1997; MacDuffie, 1997). For example, few managers may consider how strategy impacts structure and consequently employee behaviour, as described in the example above. Few are also able to understand the multi-causal nature of several of these elements. For example, organizations that are run top-down can turn more democratic when stakeholders become more powerful to initiate bottom-up renewal, or when external powers force an organization to be redesigned. Unfortunately, in practice, WO Psychologists tend to be marginalised, and viewed as peripheral, even juxtaposed to the primary purpose of the organization, and this tends to limit their opportunities for access to board level decision-making (Karanika-Murray & Weyman, 2013). In many organizations, WO Psychologists, especially those who are more practice-focused, are often too much of an island and for various reasons also unable to link their role to broader human resource

management issues. In the next section, we explore how WO Psychologists can position themselves differently and add value.

Second, *WPI is by nature multidisciplinary*: it brings together a range of stakeholders and draws from a range of knowledge and practice domains. WPI is not solely about worker engagement, workplace health, job design, or human resource management. Rather, it is about integrating a range of perspectives such as business and operations management. Too often, however, WPI seems to be approached as a solely human resource management topic. As a consequence, many underestimate the potential of WO psychology to contribute to WPI, which may result in underusing the potential of WPI (Howaldt et al., 2016). Well-known examples come from the work-related stress literature. For instance, many practitioners and researchers tend to limit themselves to the application of stress management programmes that deal with the effects of stress, but overlook the causes of stress that are deeper within the organization's structure (Cox, Griffiths, & Rial-González, 2000; Cox, Karanika, Griffiths, & Houdmont, 2007; Karasek & Theorell, 1992; Kompier & Kristensen, 2001; Oeij et al., 2006).

Third, because WPI practice necessarily involves the organization in its entirety, it also poses *communication challenges for those involved in its implementation*, including managers, researchers, practitioners, and other stakeholders. In practice, human resource, line, and operational managers seem to function within separate silos within organizations. Indeed, this communication issue is known (Petronio, Ellemers, Giles, & Gallois, 1998; Roehling et al., 2005; Stone, 2004; Sutcliffe, Lewton, & Rosenthal, 2004). By appreciating the stakeholders' different perspectives, WO Psychologists can help to identify and address their different needs and facilitate dialogue among them. For example, by understanding both research and the needs of the business and its commitments to customers, they are able to better translate research findings into practice and align these to business priorities. By understanding leadership theory and employee motivation, they are able to appreciate the challenges that managers have, identify the motivational needs of employees, and smooth communication between the two. And by getting acquainted with the basics of operations management, they are able to become better partners for engineers and shop floor managers.

Fourth, although WPI is necessarily an affair among multiple stakeholders, the hierarchical nature of organizations often means that *power rather than relevance or expertise determine the influence of specific stakeholders* and this is especially the case in WPI practice. Power in most organizations is asymmetrically distributed (Buchanan & Badham, 2008), which means that owners and managers have higher decision-making power than those carrying out the work. Often, management fads, opinions, and desires feed change, rather than rigorous evidence and evidence-based good practice. How managers think largely influences how the organization is or should be run. A management philosophy, for instance, to centralise or decentralise, may strongly affect whether an organization is led more top-down or bottom-up, respectively. Convincing examples stem from the literature on lean management. Originally, lean management saw high quality of working life and genuine team autonomy as key drivers for enhancing the quality of performance (Suzaki, 1987; Womack & Jones, 1996; Womack, Jones, & Roos, 1990). However, the practical application of lean thinking has been dominated by a drive to improve cost-efficiency at the detriment of the quality of jobs, essentially increasing workload (Oeij, Kraan, & Dhondt, 2013). In this case, the potential of WO psychology to take a whole-systems approach can be beneficial. The context of WPI makes collaboration between practitioners and researchers and between WO Psychologists and other professionals extremely important. In the next section, we make the potential value of WO psychology more tangible.



## How can WPI practice recognize the untapped potential of WO psychology?

Achieving a more substantive use of WO psychology in WPI practice relies on two conditions: that WPI recognises the potential that WO psychology can offer and, at the same time, that WO Psychologists broaden their role in WPI practice. For WPI to recognise the potential of WO psychology, two recommendations can be made.

First, it is necessary that all WPI stakeholders develop a recognition that WPI practice is multidisciplinary and involves a strategic focus on the whole organization. Power and influence is important only to the extent that it is functional and can help to achieve an agreed common goal. In this case, the common goal is to successfully implement WPI, which can only be achieved if all the elements of WPI are met and if all stakeholders and WPI practitioners (Psychologists, HR specialists, and social science practitioners) collaborate.

In addition, because of their training, WO Psychologists are in a good position to deliver the evidence in evidence-based management practice. Chartered WO Psychologists are trained intensively in all EU countries, but this training rarely includes a focus on organizational strategy and structure. Integrating this focus in WO Psychologists' training would help to contextualise their knowledge, make it more easily applicable in practice, and strengthen its transferability in a range of settings. This is all the more relevant in the context of WPI, given that WPI research falls into the realm of applied science and involves offering solutions to problems ((mode 2 of research) rather than developing 'scientific inquiry' (mode 1 of research) (cf. Anderson et al., 2001; Gibbons et al., 1994). This is in line with Argyris's (1996) notion of a need for actionable knowledge, that is, knowledge that can be used practically to improve the functioning of organizations. For instance, he points out that, whereas there is much work in the empirical literature on the relevance of trust in managing, little attention has been paid to how managers can create trust. Mobilising, translating, adapting, and applying research findings in order to develop relevant practice that is based on solid evidence is a strength that WO Psychologists bring.

All WPI practitioners could consider the fact that in practicing WPI, *culture* is dependent on both *structure* and *strategy*, and that these are determined by management, marketing, business and sales, and (technical/operational) engineers. This requires adopting a more pluralistic approach to collaboration. Indeed, team innovativeness is dependent on both team climate and team structure (Anderson, Potočnik & Zhou, 2014). Adopting a pluralistic approach is a matter of self-reflection for all those involved in WPI practice in order to make the most of everyone's skills, knowledge, and expertise.

## How can WO Psychologists strengthen their contribution to WPI practice?

WO Psychologists too can implement some changes in order to claim a place or develop a stronger foothold in WPI practice. Here we present our recommendations on how this can be achieved.

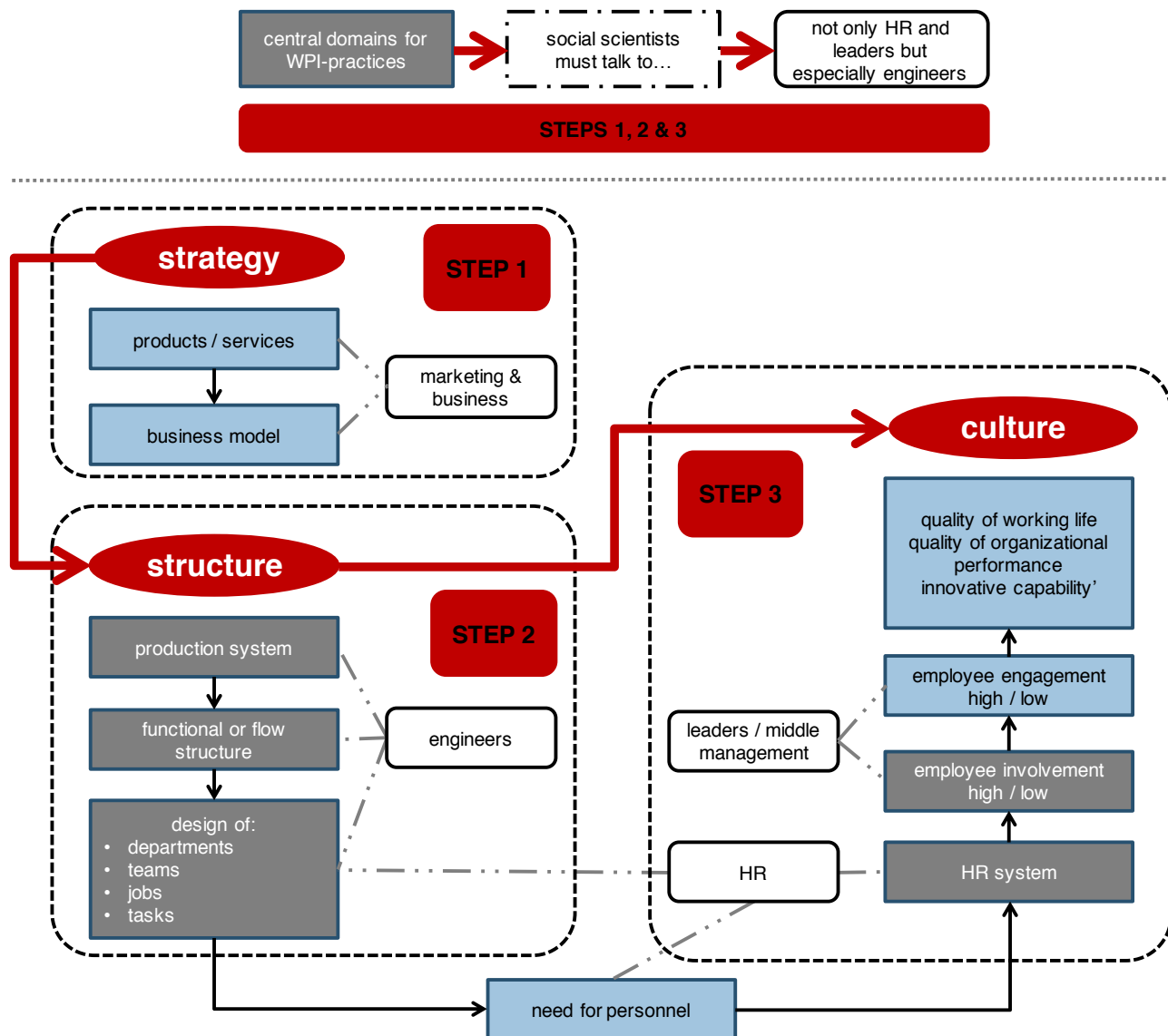
First, for WO Psychologists to influence WPI, they must surpass HR management and *become acquainted with production systems design*. This means that they should understand the relationship between operational systems and job tasks and how these job tasks relate to human resource issues. Adopting such a role would enable them to partake in improving both performance and the quality of working life. It is thus possible to broaden the immediate focus of WO psychology (from human resource management issues, individual health, and job design, for example) and become acquainted with organizational strategy, structure, production systems design, marketing, and IT systems. As Figure 2 below indicates, the role of WO Psychologists can be expanded beyond human resource staff or 'general' managers (such as

engineers, marketers, and technical managers) to that of consultancy partners or interlocutors of functionaries. Engineers, IT designers, and operational managers design the (technological) production system, which defines whether job autonomy will be centralised or decentralised. Marketers develop products in conjunction with manufacturing that determines how production orders flow through the organization, namely with or without a say of internal production experts. Human resource staff design human resource systems as 'supporting' or 'advising the business', which has consequences for workers in becoming docile or proactive task executors. Finally, managers and team leaders may wish their employees to follow what markets demand or to absorb market knowledge themselves from customers. Consequentially, employees may become trivial task executors or co-innovators of the firm's products or services. Whether WO Psychologists embrace their role as active consultants or accept a secondary dependent role largely determines how their expertise is used and developed. If WO Psychologists choose the first avenue, WO psychology can become more 'organizational' in relation to WPI practice. This is a matter of self-learning and expanding the WO psychology knowledge base.

In addition, it is important for an organization's management to understand that *WO Psychologists' expertise can contribute to both better jobs and better performance* (De Sitter et al., 1997; Pot, 2011; Ramstadt, 2014). The two are inseparable. WO Psychologists are also able to help achieve a balance between a focus of WPI at the organizational level with a focus of WPI at the individual level. This implies balancing business values and corporate economic objectives with humanistic and societal values (Lefkowitz, 2008). This is a matter of WO Psychologists adopting a new role and becoming allies with top management, decision-makers, and business owners, rather than simply acting as researchers or consultants in the process of WPI implementation. Those who make the decisions need expert input on matters on which they are not as knowledgeable. A combination of knowledge and decision-making authority can lead to more responsive practice and this can only be achieved by delegating a more strategic role to WO Psychologists in organizations practicing WPI.

WO Psychologists also *have a catalytic role for evidence-based management practice* (Cascio, 2007; Rousseau & McCarthy, 2007). By sharing their expertise, they can demonstrate how research can provide solutions to broader strategic challenges. By communicating and translating research findings they can help practitioners solve problems (Shapiro, Kirkman, & Courtney, 2007). For example, Aguinis et al. (2010) described how Psychologists can demonstrate rigour and relevance of research for specific groups in specific contexts by collecting additional quantitative data or more localised qualitative data to supplement existing knowledge. This can be achieved by striving for a balance between the particular (relevance) and the general (rigour) and for strong research that is relevant for the aims and practices of business organizations. Neither overemphasising relevance at the expense of rigour (Aram & Salipante, 2003) nor pushing for rigorous research whose findings are not readily applicable to organizational practice (Anderson et al., 2001) is useful.

Figure 2. Flowchart to conversations about the design of strategy, structure, and culture from the WO psychologist's (or social scientist's) perspective



Note: **White boxes** represent the interlocutors of the WO psychologist/consultant. **Grey boxes** represent central domains for the implementation of WPI practices. **Blue boxes** represent domains less central to the design of WPI practices, but with consequences for WPI practices or how WPI practices play out (e.g., related to technical interventions in Step 1; team design and staffing in Step 2; reward systems in Step 3). **Red lines and grey dotted lines** suggest that WO Psychologists are not allowed to ignore that they must talk to White box interlocutors about Grey WPI issues if they want to steer on causes, and not just on effects ('symptoms').

The WO psychologist is the spider in the web that links the conversation about strategy, structure, and culture, who is – on purpose - not depicted as he/she provides advice to the change leader who is supposed to be really central and link the White Box stakeholders to engage about the Grey issues when WPI interventions are being developed and implemented.

**Step 1:** At the strategic level, talk to marketing and business, who are responsible for products/services and the business model.

**Step 2:** At the structure level, talk to engineers, who are responsible for designing the production system into smaller segments like departments and tasks; align the talking to engineers with the talking to HR (links with Step 3), who are responsible for staff, and the co-design of departments, teams, jobs and tasks, and the HR system.

**Step 3:** Concerning culture, continue to talk to HR and leaders/managers about involving and engaging organizational members. Leadership styles and mature ways of communication with bottom-up inputs are options for choice.

Note that the order of Steps 1–3 suggest linearity; in a change process, this is never the case. The steps will likely iterate. Not depicted either in this scheme for reasons of simplicity, are employees / employee representatives. and top management, but they, of course, do play either a direct role or indirect role (via representatives).

Furthermore, where the evidence is scarce, WO Psychologists can apply their research skills to investigate specific practitioner-oriented research issues (Shapiro et al., 2007). The generation of such evidence has to be problem-initiated rather than a purely intellectual activity, transcend



epistemological doctrinaire views, and geared at testing the validity of research as “utilization of the knowledge in the world of practice” (Aram & Salipante, 2003, p. 203). The essential question is: can this research evidence or new knowledge be immediately applied into practice? In line with this, Hirschhorn and Geelan (2008) suggested that creating research translation roles is one of the four essential solutions for closing the research-practice gap (the others being: fixing the researcher, fixing the practitioner, and fixing the research). Creating a role for the ‘research translator’ who “would be adept at speaking the language of both practitioners and researchers and would be able to translate research findings into a form that is comprehensible, plausible, and appears potentially fruitful to practitioners, as well as to convey the interests and concerns of practitioners to researchers” (Hirschhorn & Geelan, 2008, p. 11) would also be useful.

Of course, meeting these challenges and redefining these roles can only be achieved by no other than WO Psychologists themselves who ought to be equipped with specific tools. We use ‘tools’ rather than ‘skills’ to emphasize practical immediacy and application in organizational practice. *One of the most important tools in this respect is political acumen.* Indeed, “evidence-based management is an inherently political project” which masks “underlying fundamental differences of interpretation, purpose, and power among the various stakeholders situated on both sides of the academic practitioner/policy divide” (Hodgkinson, 2012; p. 404). WO Psychologists need to “engage in political activity in order to reduce or redirect the influence of the key stakeholders” (Anderson et al., 2001). As Anderson et al. (2001) observe, the push and pull between two groups of stakeholders, powerful academics and organizational clients, drives practitioners towards either pedantic or populist science and away from the ideal of pragmatic science. By exercising political acumen and taking a more strategic approach to collaboration, WO Psychologists can help to balance practical relevance with methodological rigour (Anderson et al., 2001; Buchanan & Badham, 2008; Cascio, 2007).

Furthermore, redistribution of power and influence necessarily involves the *development of communities of practice* who can be crucial for translating and adopting research into practice and for highlighting practical problems to guide research. If participatory action research is essential for WPI, communities of practice can offer the bridges by which WO Psychologists can produce knowledge *for* WPI practice. As Bartunek (2007) notes, “the most frequent means of creating academic practitioner relationships is through engaged scholarship, or collaborative research”, which implies “relationships between researchers and practitioners that jointly produce knowledge that can both advance the scientific enterprise and enlighten a community of practitioners” (p. 1328). Thus, ‘engaged scholarship’ as a mode of linking research and practice can both boost the relevance of research to practice and also contribute to enhanced domain knowledge (Van de Ven, 2007; Van de Ven & Johnson, 2006; also see McKelvey, 2006). Developing communities of practice may be difficult, but it is possible. It may necessitate aligning researchers’ and practitioners’ disparate beliefs about science and the relevance of the scientific method for the workplace (McIntyre, 1990). Because WO Psychologists in academic and applied settings tend to differ in their work values, (Brooks, Grauer, Thornbury, & Highhouse, 2003), developing communities of practice may also necessitate acknowledging and being more tolerant of these differences. For example, Brooks et al. (2003) showed that autonomy and scientific research were more important for academics, whereas affiliation, money, and a structured work environment were more important for practitioners. By applying his or her specialised analytical background into real-world practical settings, the experienced academic practitioner is in a position to appreciate differences in values and priorities, and align the needs of practice with the values of research.

## Concluding thoughts

There has been increasing concern in WO psychology about the divide between research and practice, which is clearly evident in the context of WPI. In this essay, we have highlighted a range of ways to achieve a meaningful and productive engagement between the two. Although a small minority believe that the researcher-practitioner divide is too challenging to bridge (e.g., Kieser & Leiner, 2009) or that the scientist-practitioner model too challenging to adopt (e.g., Brooks et al., 2003; Murphy & Saal, 1990), we have highlighted many reasons to be optimistic. As some scholars note, researchers and practitioners are more alike than different (e.g., Bartunek & Rynes, 2014) and bridging the gap “is already happening” (Hodgkinson & Rousseau, 2009). Appreciating the underused potential of WO psychology is essential for enabling Psychologists to make a unique contribution to WPI practice. Bridging the gap requires WO Psychologists to further expand their knowledge by learning from other fields such as business and operations management. Only by embracing an ‘integral perspective’ (De Sitter et al., 1997; MacDuffie, 1997; van Amelsvoort & Van Hootegem, 2017) can WO Psychologists become good interlocutors for management, and good service providers for both employees and managers. Both these key organizational stakeholders can benefit from the WO Psychologists’ input in order to perform productively in their jobs and, at the same time, enable healthy and challenging workplaces. Moreover, by offering such input, WO Psychologists can bring together their natural focus on people and behaviour (i.e., culture and leadership) and their developing understanding of systems and institutions (i.e., strategy, structure, and power).

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