


COMMENTARY

The right time, the right place: Collectively aligning I-O research with small business needs

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Although we agree with Zhou et al.'s (2024) concerns about the science–practitioner gap as they pertain to small businesses, we contend that a greater emphasis should be placed on coordinating the efforts of researchers, academic leaders, and journal personnel to better translate academic findings for practitioners working in these contexts. Moreover, the disconnect between science and practice should not be understated, and more calculated efforts to engage small business owners should be prioritized. As such, in the following commentary, we briefly highlight important considerations about small businesses, perceptions of small business owners regarding external help, and keys for successfully bridging the science–practice divide, with an ultimate focus on connecting researchers and practitioners in person.

The low ratings of academic research by small business practitioners, as reported by Zhou and colleagues, may stem from the fact that small businesses operate in highly specific contexts that are not generally addressed by industrial-organizational (I-O) publications. Specifically, it would be unwise to assume that small businesses, along with their leadership, teams, and multiteam systems, function in the same manner as larger organizations. For example, larger organizations often have more bureaucratic structures, which can slow down the implementation of change initiatives. In contrast, small businesses may have limited financial resources and smaller talent pools, making it challenging to attract and retain top talent. These contextual differences underscore the need for more specific I-O research tailored to the unique realities of small businesses.

Additionally, we would be remiss not to mention that small businesses are often referred to as the “lifeblood” of the U.S. economy (e.g., Bruwer & Smith, 2021, p. 75; Doré, 2019; Hausman, 2005, p. 773). Pertinently, over the 27-year span from 1995 to 2021, small businesses accounted for a net increase of 17.3 million new jobs, or 62.7% of the net new jobs created during that time (U.S. Small Business Administration, 2023). However, despite their prominent role in job creation, new small businesses only have a 15-year survival rate of 25.6%. This operative challenge is captured in a 2020 report from the Bureau of Labor Statistics, which revealed that although 1.07 million businesses opened that year, 1.02 million permanently closed (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2020).

This year, we received survey feedback from 152 small business owners in North Carolina, and 101 (66.4%) felt that they would benefit from a business consultant's assistance in running or growing their small businesses. Although we acknowledge that these data are from a specific region of the U.S. and limited by convenience sampling, it suggests that, among the 61.7 million individuals employed in small businesses (U.S. Small Business Administration, 2023), substantial demand for additional knowledge and expertise may exist and is worthy of further inquiry. Notably, by meeting these demands in a timely manner, I-O researchers can help mitigate the potentially undesirable effects of nonscientific information sources on small business stakeholders.

Although small businesses and their unique challenges have been largely overlooked by the I-O community, I-O researchers, university leaders, and journal outlets should jointly recognize the critical importance and potential opportunities available to help translate scientific findings into practical insights for small business stakeholders. In this article, we propose that the key to successfully bridging the divide between I-O research and small business owners lies in (a) targeting the right audience with the right information at the right time; (b) making research results more immediately accessible to practitioners; (c) coordinating the collective efforts of researchers, academic institutions, and journals; and (d) sustaining collective efforts over time through incentives.

To effectively target the right audience with the right information at the right time, opportunities to build and maintain relationships with small business practitioners should not be ignored. University leaders can facilitate this targeted focus by hosting events that integrate existing community engagement efforts with researchers' efforts. Specifically, academic institutions can play a proactive role in helping I-O researchers cultivate the relationships necessary to communicate with small business stakeholders effectively. Further, universities can help connect researchers with practitioners by actively marketing their faculty members' knowledge and expertise to small business owners at the most opportune moments, such as when these businesses are facing ambiguous challenges or looking to improve staffing procedures. In turn, by staying attuned to small business owners' evolving needs and challenges, I-O researchers can not only demonstrate their commitment to fostering the development of practitioners' knowledge and skills, but they can also provide the timely support and guidance required to shape small business stakeholders' outcomes.

Toward this end, I-O academics must allocate time to engage with small businesses, and this engagement is crucial to develop the relationships and perceived credibility necessary to influence them. Relatedly, to gather information for this article, we performed a Google search to identify the 10 chambers of commerce closest to our university. For those unfamiliar, chambers of commerce are typically nonprofit organizations that promote and protect the interests of local businesses in an area. Although some are larger (e.g., U.S., state, county-based) and provide services for multinational corporations and their employees, others are dedicated to a small city or town and serve almost exclusively small business owners.

Notably, after calling these chambers, speaking with a representative, and informing them about our university affiliation, educational background, knowledge, skills, and interest in volunteering our services, all 10 expressed a desire to schedule a follow-up meeting or have us attend an upcoming event where small business owners would be present. Although we recognize that these are anecdotal experiences and our sample size is small, we contend that there are likely many opportunities available to I-O researchers to bridge the science–small business practitioner gap. One director who had recently spoken with several other chamber leaders across her region lamented that it had been a “widespread struggle” for these leaders to find volunteers with “substantial expertise.” Another director, from a separate chamber, was “elated” to talk to us and even pitched the idea of hosting an upcoming meet-and-greet where we would provide a 15- to 20-minute presentation on how we could use our knowledge to help small businesses, which would be followed by one-on-one conversations with interested small business owners in attendance. In all cases, we learned about upcoming events where small business owners would be present. To facilitate our involvement, some chambers even proactively offered to add us to their email lists, so that we could remain informed about opportunities to connect with businesses in our area.

Taken together, I-O scientists can likely find many opportunities to connect with the local economic ecosystems surrounding universities. Relatedly, chambers of commerce often host extended, cohort-based leadership institutes for local emerging leaders, local chapters of the Society for Human Resource Management, Rotary clubs, and other business-related groups that gather to be exposed to educational content. Similarly, academic institutions with entrepreneurship and small business programs typically identify local businesses needing staffing-related

guidance and consulting expertise. Thus, a motivated I-O psychologist should find no shortage of opportunities to provide distilled and impactful scientific advice to small business owners. In short, we contend that there is a massive unmet demand for guidance that I-O psychologists can address without ever having to leave their local communities. Further, these local communities are places where they likely already have a vested interest in seeing small businesses thrive.

Pertinently, effectively influencing small business practitioners requires deep thought toward interpreting and simplifying research findings in a practical manner, so that step-by-step instructions for application can be provided. Although many of us have written about practical implications in our manuscripts, these sections are generally brief and provide little information about specific, clear, and actionable steps to solve problems. Moreover, we contend that the academic push toward considering counterintuitive relationships and extreme nuance as it pertains to theories and findings may only serve to increase the likelihood that researchers deviate from prioritizing practical application.

Specifically, to help address the science–practitioner divide as it pertains to small business owners, we must be cautious about normalizing complexity rather than parsimony in the communication of our research ideas. We should not assume a terminal degree and research-focused vita make anyone credible and valuable to small businesses. Ultimately, business leaders are looking for answers to their most important questions, and I-O psychologists with these answers will only be deemed helpful if they can provide clear instructions. For example, what specific, implementable recommendations can we provide small business leaders regarding seasonal recruitment, sustainable employee incentives, or remote team member coordination? Behind each of these questions are existing science-based answers. Thus, although we acknowledge contextual nuance is likely to exist, our position is that the most prominent challenges lie in the willingness of our field to engage directly, distill succinctly, and actually serve the leaders and managers we have dedicated our research time to understanding.

In addition to targeting the right audience, making research results more immediately accessible to practitioners is crucial for the timely application of I-O research in small businesses. Journal articles can be written in ways that encourage people outside the I-O discipline to read and interpret research findings. To facilitate this, publication outlets can utilize existing tools, such as readability indices, to ensure that the reading level of articles is accessible to as many potential stakeholders as possible. Moreover, outlets may benefit from providing supplemental practitioner-focused summaries, infographics, or short video examples depicting the application of concepts. Taken together, there are still pragmatic steps that can be taken to increase clarity surrounding I-O research and the likelihood that it will be consumed and applied by small business practitioners when they need it most.

Furthermore, successfully bridging the gap between I-O research and small businesses may require synchronizing the collective efforts of researchers, university leaders, and journal editors and publishers. By creating shared goals, regularly communicating to stay on the same page, and collectively coordinating their actions, these groups can all play an integral role in minimizing the divide between science and small business practice. For example, researchers can focus on topics that are current and interesting to practitioners, such as artificial intelligence, whereas university leaders can provide the necessary resources and support for faculty members to engage in applicable outreach activities. Simultaneously, journals can ensure that research results are presented in ways that are more engaging and understandable to practitioners.

Finally, universities should incentivize faculty members to engage in research translation and outreach activities to ensure that efforts are sustained over time. Currently, those on the tenure track, who are evaluated almost entirely based on research output, may find less benefit in investing time and energy to communicate their findings to small business practitioners. However, by considering a faculty member's impact on small businesses and practitioners as part of the evaluation criteria for merit raises or annual bonus compensation, academic institutions can signal the importance of this work and encourage more faculty members to prioritize it. For example,

universities, colleges, and departments can recognize and reward faculty members who engage in “bridging” activities, including participating in small business advisory councils, facilitating meetings at local chambers of commerce, conducting applied research on small businesses, and supervising classroom projects in which students complete work for small businesses. Notably, a shift toward incentives may be necessary to promote and reinforce applied research on small businesses and the interactions and involvement necessary to provide value to small business stakeholders promptly and consistently.

In closing, owing to the vital role of small businesses in job creation and the challenges they face in terms of survival, I-O researchers can play a meaningful part in providing the knowledge and support necessary for success. By targeting the right audience with the right information at the right time, making research results more immediately accessible to practitioners, synchronizing collective efforts, and sustaining these efforts over time through incentives, researchers can better bridge the gap between science and practice, and make a more pronounced impact on the lives of small business owners.

Competing interests. The authors declare no competing interests.

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Cite this article: Alipour, K. K. & Herdman, A. O. (2024). The right time, the right place: Collectively aligning I-O research with small business needs. *Industrial and Organizational Psychology* *17*, 418–421. <https://doi.org/10.1017/iop.2024.42>