

The Evidence Imperative: A Janus View on Advancing HR from Practice to Profession



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Article Summary:

This article explores how HR stands at a pivotal crossroads, needing to fully embrace evidence-based practices to strengthen its credibility as a true profession. The author draws on the Roman god Janus, who is known for having two faces looking in opposite directions, to highlight HR's unique position of honoring its administrative past while pushing toward a more strategic, evidence-based future. Through a look at key historical milestones, the article shows how critical reflection and rigorous use of evidence have consistently propelled HR forward. Ultimately, a compelling call for a stronger commitment to evidence-based management, urging HR professionals to combine research, data, and critical thinking to shape the future of the field.



Like Janus, the Roman god who looks both backward and forward, we stand at a threshold. We honor the progress made. We assess where we are now. And we look forward to a future shaped not just by technology, but by professionals who know how to ask better questions, seek better evidence, and make better decisions.

THE JANUS MOMENT

Human Resources is at a Janus moment—looking back at its evolution from administrative function to strategic partner, while facing forward toward the demands of becoming a true profession. Named for the Roman god of transitions, Janus symbolizes both reflection and foresight. And that's exactly what this moment in HR's development calls for: a clear-eyed assessment of where we've been, a realistic look at where we are, and a strategic vision of where we must go.

Despite decades of progress, HR still hasn't crossed the threshold into recognized professional status. This article makes the case that embracing an evidence-based approach is the key to completing that journey—especially as HR now operates in environments arguably more complex and context-dependent than those faced in medicine or education.

To understand how we got here—and where we need to go—it's worth returning to a familiar scene from the early days of HR.

It is 1980. There is an open position to be filled. It has been advertised in the classified sections of several local newspapers. Employees who are aware of the opening alert those in their network who they'd like to have as a colleague. Several candidates come in for an interview and meet with the Department Head and the Personnel Manager. Afterwards, the two get together and decide who to hire. The department head relies on "a firm handshake, eye contact, and a gut feeling" about the candidate's character.

The Personnel Manager goes with instinct from the informal, unstructured questions covered during the interview.

Today, many organizations still struggle with bias in hiring despite access to sophisticated structured interviews, AI-driven assessments, and validated selection tools. Some leaders still override data-based hiring recommendations in favor of their judgment of having "a good feeling about this person."

Janus provides the perfect metaphor to explore the past, present, and future of the HR profession—especially in its ongoing struggle to become truly evidence-based.

We begin by looking back at the evolution of HR, tracing its roots from personnel management to today's strategic function, and examining how the connection between research and practice has shifted over time. Then, we assess where HR stands today—caught between intuition-driven decision-making and the potential for a fully professionalized, evidence-based discipline. Finally, we look forward to the future, considering how HR can move closer to true professionalization by embracing evidence-based management, leveraging Artificial Intelligence (AI) responsibly, and integrating high-quality research, data, and stakeholder insights into everyday practice. We'll also explore practical strategies HR professionals can use to strengthen decision-making and elevate the field through evidence-based practice.

Janus reminds us that progress requires both learning from the past and making informed choices about the future. HR must do the same—honoring its history while fully committing to evidence-based practices that will define its credibility and impact moving forward.

LESSONS FROM THE PAST: A PLAYBOOK FOR HR'S FUTURE

Looking back at the evolution of HR isn't simply a history lesson, it's a playbook. The milestones that mark our profession's past offer valuable insight into how we've progressed, where we've stumbled, and what it will take to move forward. These moments remind us that the development of HR as a profession has always been intertwined with how we use and sometimes misuse evidence.

Understanding the roots of our field sheds light on how an evidence-based approach can help HR mature into the profession it aspires to be.

One of the earliest influences on modern HR came from the era of Scientific Management and intelligence testing during the early 20th century. In the industrial age, Frederick Taylor introduced time-and-motion studies to improve labor efficiency, while World War I and II ushered in the widespread use of psychological testing to place soldiers in roles best suited to their capabilities. These efforts to apply measurable, replicable methods to workforce decisions laid the foundation for today's rigorous validation of HR assessments. While flawed in execution at times, this period instilled the idea that workplace decisions could and should be informed by objective data.

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The Hawthorne Studies at Western Electric in the 1920s and '30s began as a straightforward attempt to assess how lighting impacted productivity but quickly morphed into something else entirely. The re-examination of the confusing results helped spark the Human Relations Movement, which placed renewed focus on the social and psychological dynamics of work. Importantly, the Hawthorne Studies also revealed how data can easily be misinterpreted, and how fragile conclusions can be when we don't question assumptions or probe further. In many ways, this was an early call for a more deliberate and evidence-informed approach to interpreting organizational behavior.

The late 20th century brought further professionalization through the emergence of HR certifications and formalized bodies of knowledge, led by organizations such as HRCI and SHRM. These certifications helped elevate the field by introducing shared standards for HR professionals and creating benchmarks for competence across industries. However, despite this progress, the field still struggles to define what HR professionals must truly know and be able to do. Certification bodies vary in how much emphasis they place on critical thinking, data literacy, and the use of scientific evidence—core components of an evidence-based HR practice.

At Villanova, the creation of the Human Resource Development (HRD) program in 1980 emerged in direct response to some of the tensions in the field. Dr. David Bush, the Founding Director, recognized the disconnect between the academic study of people and the transactional, administrative reality of personnel work at the time. As he described it, “It wasn’t HR; it was Personnel Administration.” Most organizations were focused on tracking leave time, maintaining records, and administering benefits. Few saw the role as strategic. But Bush, trained as a developmental psychologist, saw potential.

With this mindset, the program took shape, rooted in the belief that research findings should be applied to real organizational challenges. The Philadelphia region, filled with professionals hungry for relevance and impact, responded enthusiastically. Villanova’s Augustinian ideals of community and service resonated with the program’s purpose: to develop HR professionals who could improve both workplaces and lives. The HRD program quickly built a reputation for integrating theory with practice—offering courses in training, analytics, strategic planning, and the philosophies of thought leaders like W. Edwards Deming and Tom Peters. It was, in many ways, an early and practical embodiment of evidence-based HR before that term had entered the lexicon.

Yet even as programs like Villanova’s took root, the divide between academic research and practitioner knowledge continued to shape HR education. In the 1980s, few academic journals were accessible to practitioners, and even fewer practitioners were trained to critically evaluate scholarly evidence. Faculty often published work with little connection to the practical realities HR professionals faced, while practitioners leaned on case studies and industry reports with limited empirical rigor. This divide fostered parallel tracks—one emphasizing theory, the other emphasizing application—with too few bridges between them.

Over the decades, instead of narrowing, this research-practice gap has in some ways widened. Today, HR professionals have access to more data than ever—from engagement surveys to performance dashboards to predictive analytics—yet decisions are still frequently based on intuition, trendy practices, or vendor-driven solutions. Too often, these decisions prioritize convenience or familiarity over critical appraisal. Compounding the problem, the rise of consultants and packaged “best practices” has shifted the locus of HR insight from internal learning and peer-reviewed research to externally marketed solutions that aren’t always evidence-based.



Evidence-based HR seeks to correct this trajectory by reconnecting practice with rigor, challenging professionals to gather data from multiple sources, evaluate its quality, and apply it in context. It urges us to balance stakeholder perspectives with scientific findings, and to treat practitioner expertise as valuable, but not sufficient. In doing so, it represents not just a set of tools, but a professional mindset—one that aspires to meet the same standards of evidence, ethics, and excellence found in other disciplines like medicine, education, and public health.

The history of HR shows us that progress is possible when we blend insight with application. But it also shows us that without ongoing critical reflection, we risk sliding back into habit, convenience, or overconfidence. That's why looking back isn't nostalgia—it's strategy. The lessons are there. We just need to use them.

WHERE WE ARE TODAY: A PROFESSION AT A CROSSROADS

Not long ago, an HR department at a mid-sized company launched its annual engagement survey. It celebrated its capability of delivering results in real time. The dashboard lit up with colorful charts, sentiment scores, and AI-generated summaries. But when a particular division's scores plummeted in areas like leadership transparency and psychological safety, the response wasn't reflection, but rather rationalization. Leadership dismissed the results as "skewed by a few vocal detractors" and focused instead on areas that showed marginal improvement. An outside consultant was brought in to "reframe the data," and during the all-hands meeting, employees were told how "encouraging" the feedback had been.

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In truth, this wasn't so different from what happened even into the 1990s, when paper surveys were filtered, cleaned up, and cautiously shared with leadership. Back then, employees withheld honest feedback because they doubted it would matter or they feared recrimination. Today, the technology is faster and more advanced, but the cultural habits persist. The problem often isn't the data. It's what we choose to do or not do with it.

Despite some lagging advances, HR has made significant strides toward professionalization. Today, more than 100 universities and business schools worldwide, including Villanova, have embraced elements of evidence-based management in their curricula. This growing academic emphasis is helping to equip the next generation of HR and business leaders with the tools and mindset needed to critically assess evidence and apply it meaningfully. It reflects a significant step forward in professionalizing HR education and aligning it with the demands of a more analytical, data-informed workplace.

The pandemic further accelerated HR's transformation. HR professionals were thrust into strategic roles, managing complex challenges such as remote work transitions, employee well-being, and organizational resilience. In this context, CEOs and executive teams began to recognize the value of HR insights grounded in data and analytics, aligning HR more closely with other data-driven functions in the C-suite, and in fact, expecting that HR will operate in that fashion.

Despite these advancements, there remains more to HR's journey toward becoming a profession. While access to data has improved, the consistent application of evidence-based decision-making remains a work in progress. Embracing this approach fully will require ongoing commitment to integrating research, data analysis, and critical thinking into every facet of HR practice.

THE CASE FOR THE *NOT YET* PROFESSION

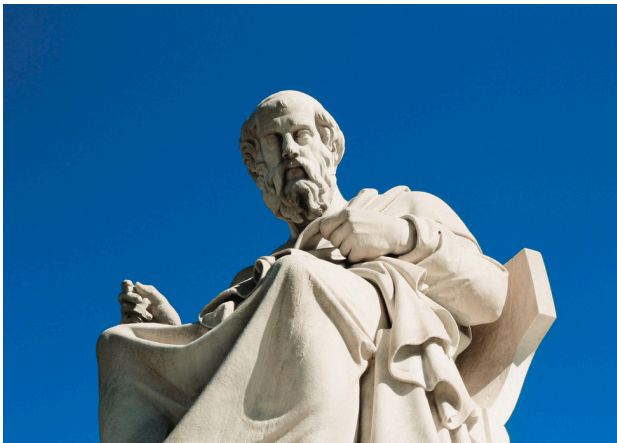
Despite decades of progress, HR continues to face an identity dilemma: is it a true profession, or a strategic function still finding its footing? Unlike medicine, law, or accounting, HR does not have a universally accepted body of knowledge, a mandatory code of conduct, or a system of regulation that defines who may practice and how. Eric Barends of the Center for Evidence-Based Management (CEBMA) argues, management as a whole lacks the core features of a profession. It is unregulated, lacks a standardized knowledge base, and does not require membership in a professional body. HR, sitting at the crossroads of management and organizational science, shares many of these characteristics.



Certainly, efforts have been made to professionalize the field. Organizations like SHRM and HRCI have worked to codify what HR professionals should know and be able to do, through certification exams and evolving competency models. These credentials offer structure and a measure of credibility, but they do not yet guarantee competence in evidence-based decision-making. Too often, certifications focus on procedural knowledge or compliance with best practices, rather than the ability to critically evaluate evidence, interpret data, or question assumptions—skills that are central to any true profession.

To be clear, evidence-based HR is not a checklist. As Denise Rousseau, a pioneer of evidence-based management, has emphasized, it's a way of thinking and acting—a commitment to integrating the best available evidence from scientific research, organizational data, practitioner expertise, and stakeholder values. Being truly evidence-based in HR means going beyond intuition or convention, even when that's uncomfortable. It means being skeptical of trendy solutions, vendor promises, or internal habits that lack a foundation in solid evidence. It's not always easy—and that's precisely why it matters.

This brings me to my own personal journey. Prior to serving as CHRO for 17 years for a non-profit organization, I was trained as an Industrial/Organizational Psychologist, immersed in research design, data analysis, and theory. When I first stepped into this HR leadership role, I quickly realized that the workplace didn't operate on controlled variables or clean datasets. Theoretical soundness met operational complexity. I had to broaden my skill set and deepen my understanding of strategy, policy, budgeting, and the nuanced art of people management.



My analytical background gave me a strong foundation, but the real challenge was translating that foundation into practical, timely decisions that balanced rigor with relevance.

I learned that bridging research and practice isn't about choosing one over the other—it was about learning to navigate both worlds. That's what evidence-based HR demands: the ability to pause, frame a question carefully, gather and appraise evidence from multiple sources, and apply it within context. These are not peripheral skills. They are core to what it means to be an HR professional. As Rousseau reminds us, understanding the “why” behind a problem is essential. It shapes how we diagnose causes and design solutions. Evidence-based HR begins with this disciplined curiosity—and a willingness to test our assumptions.

Until we, as a field, build a shared expectation around those skills—critical thinking, data literacy, and evaluative skepticism—HR will remain a “not yet” profession. We'll continue to sit at the executive table, but too often without the same standards of evidence expected of our peers in finance, operations, or marketing. If we want to change that, we need to raise our own expectations—of what HR can do, and what HR professionals must be able to do.

THE EVIDENCE-BASED IMPERATIVE: BUILDING THE FOUNDATION OF A TRUE PROFESSION

If HR is to become a true profession, it must ground its decisions in evidence—not intuition, precedent, or popularity. That's the premise of evidence-based management, the decision-making approach championed by scholars like Denise Rousseau and organizations such as CEBMA. Rousseau defines it as the conscientious, explicit, and judicious use of the best available evidence from multiple sources to make decisions that improve outcomes for employees and organizations alike.

In HR, this means going beyond best guesses or what worked last time. It means using four key sources of evidence, each with its own value—and its own limitations:

1. Scientific Research – Peer-reviewed studies that offer tested insights on what works across settings. HR professionals must be able to distinguish rigorous research from industry white papers or vendor-driven claims.

2. Practitioner Expertise – Experience is valuable, but it doesn't automatically translate into expertise. True expertise develops only under certain conditions—those that involve frequent, high-quality feedback, opportunities for deliberate practice, and relatively stable environments. Unfortunately, these conditions are rarely present in complex, fast-changing organizational settings. As a result, practitioner judgment can be flawed, especially when it's based on intuition or unexamined patterns. The most effective HR professionals are those who reflect critically on their experiences, question their assumptions, and actively seek evidence that challenges their habitual ways of thinking.

3. Organizational Data – HR analytics and dashboards provide invaluable insights into trends like turnover, engagement, or performance. But not all data is created equal. Poor data quality, inconsistent definitions, and siloed systems can lead to misleading conclusions—or make it difficult to link related insights across different platforms. Correlation does not equal causation, and data without interpretation—or without appropriate context—can obscure more than it reveals. Looking ahead, AI may play a valuable role in helping HR professionals make sense of complex or qualitative data, such as summarizing themes from open-ended survey responses or exit interviews. But even then, the quality of the input—and the skill of the interpreter—remain critical.

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4. Stakeholder Perspectives – Employees, managers, customers, board members, community members, and other stakeholders offer valuable insight into how decisions and policies will be experienced across the organization. To be meaningful, these perspectives must be gathered systematically and inclusively, using sound sampling methods. Stakeholder feedback is most effective when it’s balanced thoughtfully with organizational data, practitioner judgment, and relevant research evidence.

Understanding these sources is one thing. Applying them is another. Many HR professionals fall into common traps:

the lure of management fads and “thought leader” trends, the comfort of gut instinct, or the tendency to cherry-pick data that confirms a preexisting narrative. These pitfalls aren’t just theoretical—they play out in real decisions every day.

Consider the case of the vanishing training budget. In the 1990s, a senior executive might cancel a leadership development program with a wave of the hand: “Training is a cost center, not a revenue driver.” No evaluation. No follow-up. Just a gut call. Today, HR has the tools to measure training effectiveness through performance metrics, behavioral shifts, and retention data—yet many organizations still underfund development without assessing its actual ROI. That’s not a resource problem. It’s an evidence problem.

To avoid these missteps, HR needs a disciplined, practical model for making evidence-based decisions. [The CEBMa framework offers one.](#)

CEBMa FRAMEWORK

- 1. Clearly define the problem** – What are we trying to solve? Are we even asking the right question?
- 2. Gather evidence from all four sources** – Research, expertise, organizational data, and stakeholder views.
- 3. Assess the quality of that evidence** – Is it reliable, valid, and relevant to our context?
- 4. Apply the evidence** – Tailor insights to the organization’s needs, constraints, and goals.
- 5. Monitor, refine, and iterate** – Evidence-based HR is not a one-time decision; it’s a continuous learning process.

WHAT JANUS MIGHT ENVISION: HR'S EVIDENCE-BASED FUTURE

As we look forward, the challenges facing HR are only becoming more complex—and more consequential. From navigating hybrid work and workforce polarization to responding to rapid technological change and global uncertainty, HR professionals are being asked to lead in environments that defy easy answers.

The rise of AI and predictive analytics offers powerful new tools, but with them comes the responsibility to use data ethically, interpret insights wisely, and avoid over-relying on algorithms that may reinforce bias or obscure nuance. The future of HR will not be fully automated—it will be shaped by those who know how to ask the right questions, synthesize evidence from multiple sources, and make informed, context-sensitive decisions, within an AI-dominated context.

The good news is that more institutions are preparing future HR leaders with these skills. As noted previously, graduate programs like Villanova's, alongside a growing list of more than 100 universities globally, are now incorporating evidence-based management into their curricula. Business leaders, too, are raising their expectations, seeking HR partners who can speak the language of data, impact, and strategy.

To meet this moment, HR must continue evolving—not just in tools, but in mindset, capability, and professional identity. The next frontier isn't simply gaining a seat at the table—it's earning that seat through disciplined, evidence-informed leadership.



A CALL TO ACTION: PRACTICING THE PROFESSION WE ASPIRE TO BE

If HR is to become the profession we envision—credible, impactful, and grounded in expertise—we must hold ourselves to higher standards.

For HR professionals, this means:

- Asking better questions before proposing solutions.
- Actively seeking evidence from research, data, practice, and stakeholders.
- Challenging assumptions, even when they are popular or long-standing.
- Treating “what works” as a testable hypothesis, not a fixed truth.
- Building the habit of critical reflection, particularly after decisions are made.

For HR educators and leaders, it means teaching students to distinguish strong evidence from weak evidence—and from opinion or marketing.

As we look forward, AI will increasingly support HR’s evolution—automating tasks, surfacing patterns, and expanding our analytical reach. But we must remember, algorithms are only as good as the data they are trained on, and too often that data reflects historical biases or incomplete assumptions. AI can accelerate insight, but it cannot replace the professional judgment, ethical reasoning, and contextual awareness that HR demands.

That’s why evidence-based HR is not about replacing people with data—it’s about making better human decisions with data. It requires a mindset shift, not just new tools. And while certifications and frameworks help, the true work lies in cultivating critical thinking, research literacy, and the courage to follow the evidence—especially when it challenges convention.

This is how HR earns its place—not just at the table—but as a true profession. And as we mark the 45th anniversary of Villanova’s HRD program, it is the perfect time to reflect. From our founding, we have sought to bridge science and practice, theory and application. That mission is more relevant than ever.

Like Janus, the Roman god who looks both backward and forward, we stand at a threshold. We honor the progress made. We assess where we are now. And we look forward to a future shaped not just by technology, but by professionals who know how to ask better questions, seek better evidence, and make better decisions.

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