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## Evidence-based human resource management practices in three EU developing member states: Can managers tell truth from fallacy?

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### ABSTRACT

Good management practice is assumed to be the product of a good knowledge base and its application, not least in Human Resource Management (HRM). The aim of this study is to assess the extent to which managers adhere to practices of HRM that are more likely to be upheld by research evidence as opposed to beliefs for which research evidence is highly lacking. In addition, it evaluates practitioners' explanations about adopting HR practices. This study was conducted in three European Union (EU) developing countries (Poland, Croatia and Malta). A mixed-methods approach is adopted, utilising a web-based questionnaire targeting a purposive sample of 300 practitioners occupying managerial positions and directly involved in people management (Study 1), followed by 20 in-depth interviews with similar participants (Study 2). Our study reveals that managers are always fully cognisant of the main body of research evidence related to specific HR practices. Practitioners are more likely to access required knowledge for applications through popular sources rather than more reliable ones due to time constraints, inaccessibility and inability to evaluate evidence. While they appreciate the role of theory, the leap from theory to application is not easy or straightforward, commenting that large gaps between research and practice prevail. These overall trends may imply that practitioners base their decisions on personal experience rather than on evidence-based knowledge or expertise acquired through evidence-grounded applications. Results suggest that future research should focus on closing the gap by evaluating how academics impart the knowledge and how practitioners apply that knowledge.

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### 1. Introduction

Management is one of mankind's oldest practices in organised social units. Drucker (1998) has forcefully stated that management has often become the mere substitution of thought of knowledge for folklore and superstition. A cursory review of some 'best management sellers' and 'guru tips' casts doubts on the values attributed to real scientific foundations of management and the extent to which researched lines of thought make any sense for managers in today's complex realities of organisational life (Rousseau, 2012).

The main aim of this study is to evaluate practitioners'

knowledge about the evidence or otherwise associated to a number of human resource management (HRM) practices. In addition, the study seeks to evaluate practitioners' views about the role of theory, research, and practice and the gaps between them with implications for improved applications. This study is inspired by previous studies exploring the same issues, three of which are notable. The first study by Rynes, Brown, and Colbert (2002) distinctively revealed that HR managers from the US and other settings do have a number of irregular beliefs about specific researched HR topics and will rely on what they guess should work best. The authors concluded that one of the main reasons for the propagation of irregular beliefs is attributable to the lack of knowledge held by practitioners. The second study by Sanders, van Riemsdijk, and Groen (2008) assessed the gap between research and practice amongst Dutch participants. Their results replicate more or less previous findings (e.g. Rynes et al., 2002) and suggest that there are large discrepancies between what the evidence states

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and practitioners' believe, especially in areas related to recruitment and selection. The third study assesses the motives underlying managers' apparent 'ignorance'. [Barends, Villeneuve, Briner, and ten Have \(2015\)](#) surveyed more than 1500 management practitioners in Belgium, the Netherlands and the US. In general, their findings reveal that time to consult the evidence is a main barrier for translating research into practice, and this is mostly attributed to the lack of readability provided by academic materials and journals.

These studies share certain commonalities in terms of the economic settings in which they have been conducted. In general, these countries have well-developed research foundations in the field of management through high funding initiatives and a refined knowledge base that is often applicable to their cultural business context coupled with a developed management education system. However, these findings are not necessarily transferable to other business contexts in Europe. Therefore, our study surveys management practitioners from three relatively new and developing European Union (EU) member states, namely Poland, Croatia and Malta. All three countries have a market that by and large is highly dependent on the state, and competition does not take shape as in other more economically advanced countries like Nordic countries, Germany or the UK; this is in particular because of either the size or historical past of the countries, which is not always easily washed away by simply introducing new policies and legislation. On the other hand, all three countries are beginning to consider their economic competitiveness from an increasing emphasis on their human capital. Contemporary debate centres around the role of HRM in feeding a company's strategy to enhance competitiveness (cf. [Jackson, Schuler, & Kaifeng, 2014](#)). Therefore, while they may not have the research base as developed as in other countries and often require borrowing from other research conducted in different cultural contexts, they still have to face issues similar to other more developed EU member states. Hence, it is warranted to conduct this investigation in other less researched European contexts and evaluate whether the situation is comparable or different from studies conducted in more established economies.

## 2. Review of the literature

### 2.1. Evidence-based management

#### 2.1.1. An overview

The general trend accepted by most scholars is that management should be both an art and a science ([Boettinger, 1975](#); [Freedman, 1992](#)). This entails acknowledging the management to be a body of knowledge that should be imparted to practitioners to enable them to work in a versatile manner. This approach secures a tight link between theory and practice. Refusing the knowledge component and abiding to unfounded intuitions render the management neither a science nor an art. In the early 20th century, Alfred Sloan advocated the need for a more scientific approach for management. However, management evolution often meant that the artistic portion often manifests itself as managers opting for choices as they feel best and adopting 'quick fixes', thereby relegating the management discipline to a mere 'management experience' at the expense of management's reliance on more scientifically driven evidence.

In the last 10 years or so, the need to beef up decisions in management with evidence has begun to be felt. As [Rynes et al. \(2002\)](#) found, those organisations whose HR practitioners rely more on the available scientific evidence were more likely to be successful in their jobs and this reflected on their company's performance. A meta-analysis by [Crook, Todd, Combs, Woehr, and Ketchen \(2011\)](#) found that human capital relates strongly to

performance, especially when the human capital in question is not readily tradeable in labour markets. A number of scholars have taken on the challenge and started to re-route the general domain of management within a more so-called evidence-based approach. The term is relatively new to management but not so to other fields, especially medicine ([Sackett, Richardson, Rosenberg, & Haynes, 1997](#); [Sackett, Rosenberg, Gray, Haynes, & Richardson, 1996](#)). Evidence-based approaches followed suit in other fields such as policy development, environmental studies and industrial chemistry. However, in management education, the 'revolution' of how and why managers adopt specific practices as opposed to others remains mostly an art in the rawest form and subject to irregular beliefs, cognitive biases and personal preferences for methods that seem to work only in the eyes of the beholder. A number of authors have addressed this issue in a number of publications in an attempt to separate the seed from the chafe: research-based principles from mere fads and fallacies (e.g. [Latham, 2009](#); [Moss & Francis, 2007](#); [Pearce, 2009](#); [Pfeffer & Sutton, 2006a](#)). This lack of evidence-based decision-making has motivated [Pfeffer and Sutton \(2006b\)](#) to comment that 'managers are actually more ignorant than doctors about which prescriptions are reliable – and they're less eager to find out' (p. 2).

Some management thinkers have long expressed a need to steer management practice back to its scientific roots by looking at the world in a more systematic fashion. [Rousseau \(2006\)](#) defines evidence-based management (EBM) as a systematic, evidence-informed practice of management that incorporates scientific knowledge in the content and process of making decisions. This shift leaves room for one's creative expression but acknowledges that evidence is grounded in facts. While some criticisms have emerged towards EBM (e.g. [Denzin, 2009](#); [Hodgkinson, 2012](#); [Learnmonth, 2006, 2008](#); [Morrell, 2008](#)), the field has continued to grow and attract interest amongst scholars as a legitimate attempt to bridge the gap between practitioners and management researchers (e.g. [Barends, 2015](#); [Locke, 2009](#); [Rousseau, 2012](#)).

#### 2.1.2. Decision-making at the core of EBM

Decision-making is at the heart of management practice. Decisions cost money, time and resources and are an important foundation for managers' learning. We live in a business environment where the market topography is a complex one, filled with challenges and with an increasing need to undo failed business models and developing new organisational capacities to forecast and manage risk in the process of adaptation ([Rousseau & Barends, 2011](#)). [Baba and HakemZadeh \(2012\)](#) argue that the strength of evidence is a function of its rigor and relevance that in turn is manifested by its fit to the context, the quality of the findings and the replicability of the evidence. In their words, 'EBM is a way to regulate methods of gathering and assessing management and business knowledge to produce better standards and guidelines' (p. 837). Also, [Rousseau and McCarthy \(2007\)](#) state that 'EBM means managerial decisions and organisational practices informed by the best available scientific evidence' (p. 84).

Unfortunately, turning data into information and knowledge that is applicable is often not direct or straightforward. While these are interlinked processes, they exist in a cyclical fashion. This transformation is one based on logic that is both developmental and sequential and contains a degree of selective attention to the most appropriate and valid data that can elicit applicable results ([Bennett & Bennett, 2000](#)). This is because, in essence, not all the information gathered can be justified with a favourable level of good evidence. More so, translating the information (evidence) into practice requires closing the gap between what is known and what is practised ([Law & MacDermid, 2008](#); [Weaver, Warren, & Delaney, 2005](#)).

### 2.1.3. Research to the right, practice to the left

It is common experience that decisions in the management field, in general, and in the HRM field, in particular, have often been based on what Briner (2007) refers to as a quick fix (with one quick fix followed by another). Briner (2007) also posits that if HRM is serious about its claim to improve the effectiveness of organisations, then it also needs to get serious about the way it goes about claiming its basic principles for application. For instance, Allen, Bryant, and Vardaman (2010) provided several examples of critical irregular beliefs related to 'employee turnover' held by practitioners and certainly not supported by the evidence on the subject. Also, Mazza and Alvarez (2000) conducted a comprehensive content analysis on articles published on HRM in Italy and concluded that the popular press seems to be the arena where the legitimacy of management ideas and practices is produced. This process of legitimising material from the popular press also seems to be a common practice in other European countries and beyond (Barends et al., 2015). This may be attributed to the lack of time or desire to read scientific research (Cohen, 2007). It is apparent that a rift exists between researchers and practitioners. So why does the divide between researchers and practitioners persist?

Pfeffer and Sutton (2006b) noted that on the one hand it is actually the large mass of evidence that often makes it difficult for management practice to be more evidence-based, and on the other hand, the evidence is not quite often applicable or is just not good enough. In line with Weick's (1995) seven properties of sense-making, it seems that managers' decisions are based on the criterion of plausibility rather than accuracy; this in essence involves the formation of reasoning that is not necessarily correct but that fits the facts at that moment in time without the effort to break down the decision processes into smaller and complete chunks because of lack of time, lack of complete information or both (Hodgkinson, 2012; Yates & Potworowski, 2012). Pfeffer and Sutton (2006b) observed that it is not unusual for practitioners to neglect new evidence and base their decisions on dogma and belief that constrains them to question whether a practice will actually work.

In practice, the problem of the divide lies at both ends of the spectrum, that is, researchers and practitioners. According to Lawler (2007), if HRM and areas related to it (e.g. Organisational Behaviour) are to become respected more as science-based subjects, then academics, on the one hand, ought to present research findings from an evidence-based approach, inform practice satisfactorily, enable access of the findings to practitioners and present the impact of their findings within context. On the other hand, many HR practitioners lack formal education in organisational behaviour and many senior executives are not professionals in the field. Yet, Cohen (2007) emphasises that HR practitioners do not have the time or desire to read scientific research, while academics do not have the time or desire to write for non-academic audiences. Hence, 'the gap ... is very large in both directions. To reduce it will require desire, and effort, from both sides of the divide' (p. 1004).

## 2.2. The state of HR practices in the countries of study

Having provided an overview of EBM and its challenges, clearly, a review of the current state of HRM and applications in the countries of this investigation is warranted as this will enable us better to appreciate and contextualise the pattern of results in this piece.

### 2.2.1. Malta

The topic of HRM in Malta is relatively new. For many years, the term Personnel Management was used and mostly confined to the company's accounting department, which was concerned with employee records and payment and salary systems. In time, the

concept of HRM made a gradual entrance, even though many of the activities related to HRM were still largely submerged in personnel administration and therefore more relegated to micro-HR tasking instead of strategy (Armstrong & Taylor, 2014). Given that most companies in Malta are micro and the larger firms can be classified as small and medium, most of the activities related to HRM were provided by third parties or small-scale consultancies (Baldacchino, Caruana & Grixti, 2003). Malta's accession into the EU in 2004 opened the gates for a significant rise in competition, not only of a trade nature but also of human capital from abroad, meaning that Malta's perspective of HRM had to change drastically to adapt to similar changes as in other countries including globalisation, the nature of the work itself and the labour market's topography (Baldacchino, 2003). Although Malta has developed its HR over time, given the size of the country, most of HR practices are a hybrid between performance-driven measures mixed with local culture of 'doing business'. Also, trade unionism is very strong, and many companies opt for a collective bargaining approach implying that trade unions have a central role in the life of HRM and can also influence the field (Parnis, 2003). Even though progress has been visible, the state of HRM in Malta still requires further development. For example, it is still customary for companies to see the role of HRM as a luxury, and most people in that position are not necessarily people specifically trained in the field, although a high number of them possess MBAs. Also, research about strategic HRM practices is still in its infancy, given the relatively small funds available for it. On the other hand, people opting for a post-graduate degree in HRM from foreign universities have increased substantially in the last 10 years.

### 2.2.2. Croatia

In Croatia, a more recent EU member state (accession in 2014), organisations have generally struggled to adopt strategic HRM practices, although public sector organisations have trailed further behind compared to the private sector (Pološki Vokić & Hernaus, 2015). Reform within organisations in Croatia followed similar reasoning as in other European countries, namely a transition towards a free-market economy following the accession to the EU, which calls for higher standards. Consequently, Croatian organisations have been increasingly influenced by the need to perform, innovate and change. This has meant a shift from a state-oriented and collective logic towards a market and individualised approach, and HRM activities have become evident, especially through the growth of 'performance-related pay' linked to improvements in service delivery and outcomes (Čiarnienė, Sakalas, & Vienažindienė, 2007). Altogether, the switch from a 'rule-bound culture' associated with traditional personnel administration to a 'performance-based culture' of strategic HRM is needed and is still work under progress in Croatia. Pološki Vokić and Vidović (2007) remark that HRM needs to play a bigger role in achieving competitive advantage through people. More to it, the HR function in Croatia now needs to move out of the background and into the mainstream of organisational strategy and management, but this requires a shift in mindset. For example, Pološki Vokić and Vidović (2007) mention that one of the critical challenges in Croatian HRM is now to attract the attention and resources towards people issues and make every manager responsible for successful people management, thereby making Croatian managers recognise that a robust HR system will be the most valuable asset of a 21st century institution and that an enterprise's productivity is going to be closely correlated with the employee-related managerial system. HRMs in Croatian enterprises have still weak HRM practices, even though improvement has been registered. Some still encounter serious HR problems and do nothing about it in terms of investing in and practising high-performance work practices.

### 2.2.3. Poland

Poland is the largest economy among the new member states. It represents, in cultural terms, a transition between East and West, between socialism and capitalism (Listwan, Pocztowski, & Stor, 2009). The Polish way of constituting HRM practice starts from a bureaucratic administration of personnel (Weinstein & Obloj, 2002), through transformation of the HRM function, towards strategic HRM (Tung & Havlovic, 1996). The idea of personnel marketing developed in Poland in the 1990s (Zbiegien-Maciag, 1996) supports organisations in the area of recruitment. Within the last decade, most Polish research has focused on the rationalisation and higher effectiveness of HR practices in Poland (Lipka, 2009) and the current state of HRM from the perspective of human capital management. New trends or sub-disciplines of the personnel function, such as knowledge management and talent management (Przytula, 2014), have also gained popularity as reflected by numerous theoretical and empirical studies in these areas. Moreover, the concept of competency-based HRM has recently been actively developed (Filipowicz, 2016; Oleksyn, 2010), although the uptake of these practices has not been satisfactory. The lack of formal analyses on the measurement of human capital in organisations constitutes a significant barrier to demonstrate the real impact of the competency-based HRM (Sienkiewicz, Jawor-Joniewicz, Sajkiewicz, Trawińska-Konador, & Podwójcic, 2014). On the other hand, since the accession to the EU in 2004, increasing levels of HR internationalisation (Hetrick, 2002; Pocztowski, 2015; Przytula, Rozkwitalska, Chmielecki, Sulkowski, & Basinska, 2014) has been noticeable. Wide inflow of European funds, in particular European Social Funds, supported the development of employees in various areas of competence (Tracz-Krupa, 2014) and contributed to the development of people at work (Kwiatkowska-Ciotucha, 2013). The new challenges of HRM in Poland require a reorientation of policies and practices in search of the best ways to create value for stakeholders through sustainable HRM (Kramar, 2014; Mazur, 2015).

## 3. Method and results for study 1

### 3.1. Research questions

Study 1 explores the following two research questions:

1. To what extent do managers adhere to critical people management principles that are likely to be supported by evidence?
2. (a) Do (i) managers' level of education, (ii) experience in managing people and (iii) past academic or training experience in HRM explain differences in managers' prevalence of irregular beliefs?  
(b) Does country (Poland, Croatia and Malta) explain differences in managers' prevalence of irregular beliefs over and above managers' level of education, experience in managing people and past academic or training experience in HRM?

### 3.2. Sampling

The target population consisted of generalist managers in a headship position involved in people management issues/policies and working in major firms. The locations of Wrocław (Poland), Zagreb (Croatia) and Malta were specifically chosen because the researchers had direct access to the respective Chambers of Commerce. In addition, all three locations represent geographic zones where managerial occupations thrive as they are in commercially located regions. A representative from the

respective Chamber of Commerce sent out an email on our behalf inviting members who occupied the role of managers/executives in major firms and were directly related and involved in people management to participate in our study. No information about this list was provided to us because of data protection issues. The email contained information about the research and a link to an online survey. Following consultation with the contact persons at the Chambers, we were informed that obtaining responses from this group would prove to be quite difficult. Therefore, our decision was to target 100 complete surveys from each of these three locations, after which the survey was closed. Consequently, the respondents may be considered a purposive sample comprising critical cases (Saunders, 2012).

### 3.3. Research instrument

The survey entitled 'Evaluating Managers' Beliefs about Critical People Management Principles' was purposely designed for the present study and operationalised using Survey Monkey online tool. Following information about the survey on the front page (including a request for respondents' consent and assurances about confidentiality/anonymity), Section A requested personal information about their gender, age, highest level of education, area of qualification, years of experience in managing people and whether they had any past academic or training experience in HRM.

The items generated for the questionnaire were based on Locke's (2009) *Handbook of Principles of Organisational Behaviour: Indispensable Knowledge for Evidence Based Management*. This source was adopted as it provides a comprehensive list of critical people management principles. Rather than presenting universal truths, it provides a substantial amount of evidence (in the form of meta-analyses or systematic reviews) on specific OB principles relevant for people management to uphold or otherwise. The second author conducted a thorough review of the various topics discussed and generated 70 organisational behaviour aspects emanating from the various chapters. Each theme or OB aspect was listed down and noted for the available evidence associated with it. The first named author then took this list and turned it into an item. This item list was sent to a prominent member of the Centre for Evidence-Based Management (CEBMA) for his feedback, especially in terms of response type. Thus, rather than providing the typical response of 'False' or 'True' (as in studies by Rynes et al., 2002; Sanders et al., 2008), it was suggested we opt for 'Item is likely to be supported by research evidence' (denoted by S), 'Item is unlikely to be supported by research evidence' (denoted by S) and 'Don't know' (denoted by DK). The list of 70 items was then sent to two independent reviewers to see their evaluation for redundancy, clarity and difficulty. The two reviewers worked independently, and they indicated consensus that 14 items should be dropped ('redundant', 'not clear' or 'somewhat vague'). Hence, the final questionnaire comprised 56 items grouped into eight OB themes. These included (i) *Leadership* (five items), (ii) *Motivation* (nine items), (iii) *Organisational processes* (13 items), (iv) *Team Dynamics* (eight items), (v) *Selection* (nine items), (vi) *Work, Family, Technology, and Culture* (two items), (vii) *Training and Performance Appraisal* (four items) and (viii) *Turnover and Satisfaction* (six items) (see Table 1 for items).

The 56 items in the final questionnaire did not follow a sequence according to the OB theme but were randomly ordered. Thirty-seven beliefs are supported by research evidence, while the remaining 19 are not. Following a pilot and minor amendments, the questionnaires were back-translated into Polish and Croatian. In the case of the Maltese sample, the English version was retained, given that in Malta, English is an official language.

**Table 1**  
Managers' beliefs about critical people management principles that are likely to be supported by research evidence.

Survey items	S	S'	DK	p SE(p)
	Count			
<i>Leadership</i>				
L1: Apart from benevolence and integrity, ability is a critical facet of trustworthiness	244	<u>38</u>	18	0.13 0.02
L2: Combining tactics is more effective for a difficult request than using a single tactic	250	<u>29</u>	21	0.10 0.02
L3: Followers will learn to trust their leader if the leader creates a degree of visibility amongst his/her people	277	<u>11</u>	12	0.04 0.01
L4: Leading through vision and values leads to effective outcomes	239	<u>45</u>	16	0.15 0.02
L5: Outcomes in decisions are based on one's tactics, influence and situation at hand	215	<u>65</u>	20	0.22 0.02
<i>Motivation</i>				
M2: Employee empowerment is synonymous to 'leadership'	172	<u>112</u>	16	0.37 0.03
M3: Employee self-efficacy at work (i.e. the belief in oneself) increases performance	287	<u>8</u>	5	0.03 0.01
M4: Evidence shows that providing recognition inevitably leads to performance improvement	271	<u>18</u>	11	0.06 0.01
M5: Goal-setting theory is the most single theory of motivation that has been found to be consistently effective in the workplace	148	<u>85</u>	67	0.28 0.03
M8: Performance-related pay is effective because it attracts individuals who perform at high levels and makes them want to remain	223	<u>64</u>	13	0.21 0.02
M9: Evidence indicates that investing in promoting organisational fairness has so many benefits that the effort required to do so appears to be well worthwhile	225	<u>22</u>	53	0.07 0.01
<i>Organisational processes</i>				
OP1: Best stress-prevention methods require that management is actively involved in the process	218	<u>49</u>	33	0.16 0.02
OP2: Decision-making is never free from cognitive biases	196	<u>81</u>	32	0.27 0.03
OP3: Individual negotiations which take place face to face have been proven to be more effective than e-negotiations	254	<u>21</u>	25	0.07 0.01
OP5: Organisational design and strategy go hand in hand	240	<u>42</u>	18	0.14 0.02
OP7: Participation at work is more likely to be effective when used in small groups rather than across the whole organisation	202	<u>62</u>	36	0.21 0.02
OP8: Resistance to change is not necessarily negative as it provides an opportunity for learning and growth	159	<u>117</u>	24	0.39 0.03
OP10: The relationship between leadership and innovation is true but very complex	195	<u>53</u>	52	0.18 0.02
OP13: Good communication in an organisation depends on a fine balance act taking into consideration several factors like content, manner and timing	276	<u>8</u>	16	0.03 0.01
<i>Turnover and Satisfaction</i>				
TS1: Causes of employee emotions like anger, frustration and betrayal can be identified and understood	238	<u>47</u>	15	0.16 0.02
TS4: Reason and emotions at work are often in coherence	135	<u>133</u>	32	0.44 0.03
TS6: A satisfied worker is a productive worker but the reverse is also true	251	<u>42</u>	7	0.14 0.02
<i>Team dynamics</i>				
TD1: Collaboration is influenced by strong team orientation and members engaging in problem-solving behaviours	286	<u>9</u>	5	0.03 0.01
TD3: Leaders have a powerful influence on the process of the in-team	279	<u>8</u>	13	0.03 0.01
TD4: Managing conflict is difficult because of the negative emotions that are evoked	207	<u>76</u>	19	0.25 0.03
TD6: Selecting group members for their ability to facilitate teams is an important element in the teams' success	276	<u>11</u>	13	0.04 0.01
TD8: A great team is one that is responsive, where members get along and where conflict is kept as minimal as much as possible	220	<u>63</u>	17	0.21 0.02
<i>Selection</i>				
S2: Hiring employees based on their emotional stability will result in employees with a strong work ethic	121	<u>126</u>	53	0.42 0.03
S4: Interviews are more predictive if better structured and standardised	211	<u>63</u>	26	0.21 0.02
S5: Smart/intelligent employees are not likely to be better team players	163	<u>125</u>	12	0.42 0.03
S6: Tests of mental ability are the best predictors of future job performance	54	<u>208</u>	38	0.69 0.03
S9: Job interviews are open to many cognitive, motivational and contextual influences that ultimately degrade the quality of the final decision	153	<u>108</u>	39	0.36 0.03
<i>Work, family, technology and culture</i>				

(continued on next page)

Table 1 (continued)

Survey items	S	S'	DK	p
	Count			SE(p)
WFCT1: Investing in new technology at work involves re-thinking of structure, people, quality and strategy	255	<u>32</u>	13	0.11 0.02
<i>Training and Performance Appraisals</i>				
TPA1: It is easy to evaluate the ROI from training	67	<u>154</u>	79	0.51 0.03
TPA2: Performance Appraisals identify specific goals that are to be achieved during the next performance cycle	245	<u>29</u>	26	0.10 0.02
TPA3: The Performance Appraisal is only effective if the appraisal is based upon accurate performance information	225	<u>63</u>	12	0.21 0.02
TPA4: Training is to be considered as a practice that facilitates the development of individuals, teams and organisations in a holistic fashion	256	<u>30</u>	14	0.10 0.02

Note: Underlined counts represent irregular beliefs.

### 3.4. Participants

A total of 300 managers—100 from Wrocław, 100 from Zagreb and 100 from Malta—completed the web-based questionnaire; 26 were discarded in the process because the participants stopped short of completing the survey or were not directly responsible for, or engaged in, people management. These managers occupied varied roles and had various qualifications, not necessarily related to people management. The mean age of the respondents was 37.19 years (standard deviation (SD) = 9.02) and 55.7% were male; 66.3% were in possession of an undergraduate degree (the rest had a post-graduate qualification), 31.3% had a degree related to people management, 91.3% had at least 5 years of experience in managing people and 60.3% had undertaken some form of academic training in HRM to support their managerial roles.

### 3.5. Data analysis procedure

For the first research question, we generated two frequency tables: one for those practices which were likely to be supported by research evidence and another for those that were unlikely to be supported by research evidence. Subsequently, we generated the proportion ( $p$ ) of respondents who hold irregular beliefs, either because they do not adhere to critical people management principles that are supported by research evidence  $p = (S/(S + S' + DK))$  or because they discount critical management principles that are supported by research evidence  $p = (S/(S + S' + DK))$ , together with the corresponding standard error of the proportion ( $SE(p)$ ). In line with Bezzina and Saunders (2014), the 'don't know' responses were not considered to represent irregular beliefs as these respondents admit their lack of knowledge as indicated in those items.

For the second research question, we computed a global 'irregular beliefs' score for each respondent; therefore, if a respondent scored in favour of an irregular belief, s/he was assigned a score of 1 (otherwise = 0). Sum scores were obtained for each respondent (maximum score = 56), and these were then converted into percentages. We then used hierarchical multiple regression analysis together with zero-order correlations to determine whether level of education (1 = bachelor degree, 2 = post-graduate degree), experience in managing people (in years) and academic training in HRM (1 = Yes, 0 = No) emerged as significant predictors of global 'irregular beliefs' (dependent variable) in Step 1. In Step 2, we inserted country—a dummy-coded categorical variable comprising Poland ('1' if manager was Polish, '0' otherwise) and Croatia ('1' if manager was Croatian, '0' otherwise). To determine whether the assumption of independent errors was tenable, we used the Durbin Watson test (Savin & White, 1977); the variance inflation factors (VIFs) was used to determine whether multicollinearity was an issue (Field, 2009).

### 3.6. Results

#### 3.6.1. Research question 1

Table 1 shows a frequency report for the list of critical management principles likely to be supported by evidence across the various HRM domains.

Table 2 illustrates a frequency report for the list of critical management principles unlikely to be supported by evidence across the various HRM domains.

It is clear from Tables 1 and 2 that some managers' beliefs on critical people management principles do not necessarily adhere to research evidence, with the prevalence of irregular beliefs reaching a staggering 86.0% (for item OP6), while the level of 'don't know responses' (thereby implying lack of knowledge) reaching up to 26.3% (for item TPA1).

#### 3.6.2. Research question 2

The Kolmogorov-Smirnov test revealed that the irregular beliefs scores did not exhibit significant departures from normality ( $z = 1.13, p = ns$ ). Zero-order correlations showed a small, positive and significant correlation between the prevalence of irregular beliefs and experience in managing people ( $r = 0.14, p = 0.01$ ); however, there were no significant relationship between the prevalence of irregular beliefs and (i) education ( $r = -0.07, p = ns$ ) and (ii) academic or training experience in HRM ( $r = -0.03, p = ns$ ).

Step 1 of the hierarchical multiple regression analysis produced a significant  $F$ -statistic in ANOVA ( $F(3,296) = 2.84, p = 0.04, R^2 = 0.03$ ). The coefficients table (see Table 2) revealed that only experience in managing people ( $\beta = 0.15, t(296) = 2.60, p = 0.01$ ) emerged as a significant predictor of the prevalence of irregular beliefs but not level of education ( $\beta = -0.07, t(296) = -1.13, p = ns$ ) and past academic training in HRM ( $\beta = -0.05, t(296) = -0.91, p = ns$ ). Hence, these results provide evidence that experience in managing people tends to be positively associated with the prevalence of irregular beliefs among managers.

In Step 2, country—a dummy-coded categorical variable comprising Poland = 1 if manager was Polish (otherwise = 0) and Croatia = 1 if manager was Croatian (otherwise = 0)—was included as a predictor of the prevalence of irregular beliefs. Prior to interpreting the regression output, we examined descriptive statistics. The latter revealed that the managers with the highest incidence of irregular beliefs were Polish ( $M = 33.29, SD = 6.62$ ), followed by Maltese ( $M = 28.89, SD = 6.68$ ) and Croatian ( $M = 25.57, SD = 6.05$ ). Fig. 1 exhibits box plots of the prevalence of irregular beliefs distributions by country.

Step 2 of hierarchical multiple regression revealed that the prevalence of irregular beliefs varied significantly across countries ( $F(2,294) = 15.33, p < 0.01, R^2 = 0.21$ ). The dummy-coded country variables—Poland ( $\beta = 0.28, t(294) = 4.68, p < 0.01$ ) and Croatia

**Table 2**  
Managers' beliefs about critical people management principles that are unlikely to be supported by research evidence.

Survey items	S	S'	DK	p SE(p)
<i>Motivation</i>				
M1: Assigning challenging goals is less motivational than if the goals are self-set	<u>120</u>	164	16	0.40 0.03
M6: Increasing payments increases employee performance	<u>109</u>	168	23	0.36 0.03
M7: Informally recognising employees does not seem to influence their performance	<u>65</u>	217	18	0.22 0.02
<i>Organisational processes</i>				
OP4: Irrespective of the size of an organisation, it is best to have a high specialisation and decentralised decision-making	<u>122</u>	132	46	0.41 0.03
OP6: Participation at work is a great and tested source of employee motivation and employee satisfaction	<u>258</u>	31	11	0.86 0.02
OP9: Tasks should always be governed by specific rules irrespective of their degree of uncertainty	<u>133</u>	125	42	0.44 0.03
OP11: Whether negotiation takes place in the form of teams or individually will not alter the negotiation process	<u>51</u>	218	31	0.17 0.02
OP12: Passion which drives creativity is something that is solely borne from inside the person who loves his/her work and irrespective of the work environment	<u>163</u>	124	13	0.54 0.03
<i>Turnover and Satisfaction</i>				
TS2: Employee turnover has no impact on the company's bottom-line; after all people nowadays move about in the labour market	<u>46</u>	239	15	0.15 0.02
TS3: Job satisfaction does not impact life satisfaction	<u>121</u>	174	5	0.40 0.03
TS5: Understanding the reasons why people leave has no impact on future employees leaving	<u>105</u>	180	15	0.35 0.03
<i>Team dynamics</i>				
TD2: Enhancing activities in collaboration will not necessarily manage conflict effectively when it happens	<u>139</u>	128	33	0.46 0.03
TD5: Leadership functions should not be addressed before a team convenes	<u>122</u>	113	65	0.41 0.03
TD7: There are very specific personality types or styles for getting key leadership functions fulfilled	<u>237</u>	49	14	0.79 0.02
<i>Selection</i>				
S1: Experience in conducting typical job interviews increases the chances that selection decision improves	<u>220</u>	59	21	0.73 0.03
S3: Hiring on job experience is superior to hiring on general mental ability	<u>86</u>	176	38	0.29 0.03
S7: Typical interviews can deduce an interviewees' aptitude and motivation if the interviewer is well trained	<u>222</u>	54	24	0.74 0.03
S8: Using tests of mental ability is enough to deduce future job performance	<u>27</u>	254	19	0.09 0.02
<i>Work, family, technology and culture</i>				
WFTC2: Work-family strategies benefit both the family and the workplace	<u>252</u>	25	23	0.84 0.02

Note: Underlined counts represent irregular beliefs.

( $\beta = -0.22$ ,  $t(294) = -3.48$ ,  $p < 0.01$ )—both emerged as significant predictors of the prevalence of irregular beliefs, while experience in managing people was no longer significant ( $\beta = 0.10$ ,  $t(294) = 1.93$ ,  $p = ns$ ). The Durbin Watson statistic was 1.85; with 300 participants and five predictors, Savin and White (1977) tables outline 5% significance points of dL and dU as 1.718 and 1.820, respectively. Because our Durbin Watson statistic was greater than dU, we retained the null hypothesis of non-autocorrelated errors (Savin & White, 1977). Additionally, all VIFs were close to 1, indicating that multicollinearity was not an issue (Field, 2009). Table 3 exhibits a summary of the beta-coefficients table with collinearity statistics. Hence, the results provide evidence that the prevalence of irregular beliefs varies by country even after controlling for managers' level of education, experience in managing people and training experience in HRM.

## 4. Method and results for study 2

### 4.1. Research questions

The results in Study 1 suggest that the prevalence of HRM

irregular beliefs is relatively high. To better assess the sense-making process underlying such irregular beliefs, we conducted a number of in-depth interviews with practicing managers working or involved directly in HRM activities in the three countries. To this end, we wanted to understand further how practitioners explain the role of theory to practice and how they view the position of theoretical relevance to practical applications. We also explored their views in terms of the gaps they view between theory and practice. Hence, two research questions were asked:

1. What forms and sources are utilised in translating theory to application in practising HRM?
2. What suggestions, if any, are provided by managers in closing the gap?

### 4.2. Research strategy and instrument

Study 2 adopted a qualitative approach to answer the above research questions. Given that we know very little about practitioners' conceptualisations of EBM in these three countries, we decided to avoid pre-structured questionnaires. Indeed, we sought

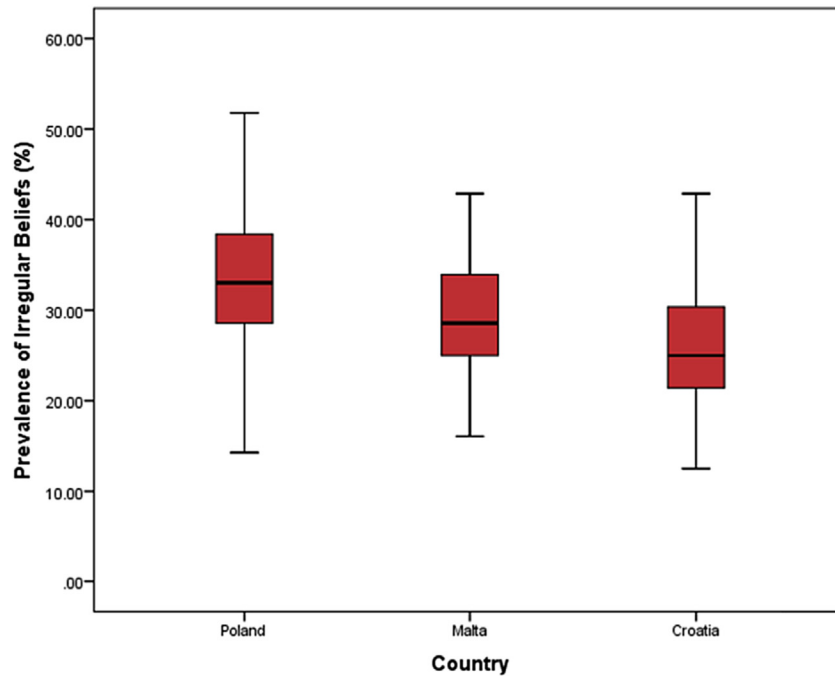


Fig. 1. Box plots showing the prevalence of 'irregular beliefs' distributions by country.

**Table 3**  
Hierarchical regression coefficients table.<sup>a</sup>

Model		Unstandardised coefficients		Standardised coefficients	T	Sig.	Collinearity statistics	
		B	Std. Error	Beta			Tolerance	VIF
1	(Constant)	27.52	1.86		14.81	0.000		
	Education	-0.98	0.87	-0.07	-1.13	0.260	0.998	1.002
	Mgt experience	3.84	1.48	0.15	2.60	0.010	0.972	1.028
	Mgt training	-0.77	0.85	-0.05	-0.91	0.365	0.973	1.028
2	(Constant)	26.96	1.72		15.72	0.000		
	Education	-0.43	0.80	-0.03	-0.53	0.595	0.972	1.029
	Mgt experience	2.61	1.35	0.10	1.93	0.054	0.960	1.042
	HRM training	0.22	0.79	0.02	0.28	0.779	0.937	1.068
	Poland	4.29	0.92	0.28	4.69	0.000	0.743	1.346
	Croatia	-3.26	0.94	-0.22	-3.48	0.001	0.709	1.411

<sup>a</sup> Dependent Variable: Prevalence of irregular beliefs.

to explore underlying explanations provided by managers, thus gaining an understanding of the meaning they make of particular experiences related to practising HRM (Symon & Cassell, 2012). The interview guide was the principal tool for data collection. For this reason, the guide and the whole interview process were designed and developed on the basis of recommendations by Arskey and Knight (1999). To ascertain validity, the guide was developed on the basis of the research questions for Study 2. This was aimed to satisfy the criteria of both range and depth (Flick, 1998). Attention was given to the construction of the questions to avoid lack of clarity, built-in biases or directed responses. Additional ambiguities were removed following a rigorous pilot study of the interview guide. Participants were asked about their background in business in general and their experiences of working as practitioners in HRM, their typical HR activities and the way they engage themselves in such activities, their understanding about theory of HRM and the evidence surrounding it and the process of adopting such theories, the information sought to reflect 'best HRM' practices, including published research, and finally their personal insights about gaps between HRM theory and practice.

#### 4.3. Procedure

There is no one best way to analyse qualitative data (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998). The recommendation is to stay as close as possible to the data itself. The main approach to analysing the interview data in Study 2 was thematic analysis whereby sections and topics directly related with the research questions were identified and extracted, utilising a template analysis approach (King, 2012). The template was primarily used to organise the data and ensure that themes were carefully selected in accordance to their relevance to the research question. The excerpts selected are representative because of word count restriction. Interview participants are indicated by a code. For example, PM1 refers to participant number 1 from Malta, PP6 refers to participant number 6 from Poland, and PC2 refers to participant number 2 from Croatia.

#### 4.4. Sampling and participants

The sample for Study 2 was based on a primary selection of the participants who have the knowledge and experience the



researchers required. The participants were selected using purposive sampling. The sampling was purposive in the sense that participants were required to meet three eligibility criteria before being allowed to participate in the study. These included (1) a good command of the English language to facilitate and ease the interviewing process, (2) employed as managers in HRM or dealing extensively with people management on a day-to-day basis and (3) worked full-time in this role. In all, the researchers managed to recruit 20 participants who fell within these criteria and were willing to participate: eight from Poland, five from Croatia and seven from Malta. The Polish interviewees' experience in HR ranged from 3 to 15 years (Md = 7); their degrees varied from ICT, HR, law, accountancy and management; and they were mostly involved in recruitment/selection, training/development, health/safety and employment relations. In the case of Croatia, their experience in HR ranged from 2 to 15 years (Md = 7); their degrees varied from general business degrees, law, economics and psychology; and they were involved in recruitment/selection, training/development and labour relations. The Maltese interviewees' experience ranged from 6 to 25 years (Md = 9); their degrees were mostly in organisational psychology, HR and management; and they were actively involved in HR activities ranging from recruitment/selection, industrial relations, training and development, health/safety and people administration.

#### 4.5. Results

##### 4.5.1. Making sense of the role of EBM

Interviewees in both Malta and Croatia emphasised the use of research evidence highlighting a particular HRM policy and the use of stakeholders, policy guidelines and other sources in their attempt to implement HR activities:

*I start by doing research. Normally I start with very generic research just to get an idea; however, I then start looking into reviewed journals, websites that are reliable and books. When I have formulated an idea, I generally discuss with someone who is a professional in the field to get other opinions and then I continue developing my idea before I present it to my colleagues. Once I receive feedback, I review and then I will publish. (PM1)*

*My previous experience of being chief strategist officer (5 years I was leading Strategy and business development in Croatian Telecom) gave me great applicable methods within the area of HR. The mainstream was how to connect HR activities and focus them on business; how to involve as much as possible managers and talented employees within HR processes in order to promote the HR business partner model. So in short, the point was to create a relevant HR department. (PC1)*

On the other hand, the Polish interviewees were less willing to commit to publish evidence and relied more on sources such as internal and external networks:

*I avail myself of the existing materials in the organisation (internal websites, forums, other social media, colleagues on similar positions, etc.). I ask HR colleagues from other organisations and search for best practices on the Internet and in books, magazines, etc. I also participate in training or HR events/meetings etc. (PP2)*

*I start with the company needs/requirements/guidelines, then prepare my draft supporting myself with reading/research, consult it with internal and external partners, then finalise the proposal and get the approval according to the decision matrix. Sometimes I use external providers to make the proposal, and then I elaborate on it. (PP5)*

Interviewees also gave a personal evaluation about the various theories related to HRM and how effective or useful these are in informing better applications to practice. The responses indicate that overall, all participants from all three countries agreed that such theories are relevant to practice, even though they have limitations as there are boundaries to the extent they can be applied. These boundaries include political and cultural barriers but also because these theories are not easily transferable to practice provided that they are grounded in academic jargon:

*Theories lay a good foundation to supplement that which we learn in practice; however, looking into theoretical backgrounds is often time-consuming and does not come with a business perspective – literature can be heavily worded, complicated to sift through and not easily accessible by the general public. (PM4)*

*The fundamental concepts of the theories can be applied; however, one cannot take these theories too literally/too academically. In my view, the theory is just a guideline/starting point to be used as a reference. One also needs to take into account the environment in which he/she works, the particular circumstances etc. and flex the concepts of the theory in a way which makes sense in practical terms. (PM7)*

*Some theories seem very credible to me – those that fit into my set of experiences, beliefs and logical conclusions, especially new fresh ideas on motivation and leadership. In current accelerated business environment changes, we are very open to them. Sometimes, we carefully try some of them as small internal experiments. (PC3)*

*They help to understand some phenomenon or prepare concepts or solutions, and they are a good source of inspiration ... Not really easily applicable; it requires lots of reflection, preparation, adaptation to the business or management needs. It's easier and quicker (always time pressure) for me to ask other practitioners for their solutions, best practices or so called 'lessons learned'. (PP2)*

Moreover, participants from all three countries reported that they have 'used' a number of HRM theories to drive their applications in various areas such as training, selection, organisational learning, emotional intelligence, performance management and leadership. Some of the participants referred to specific theories that they utilise and which, according to them, have a high degree of perceived relevance to application:

*I am a firm believer in experience and adopting HR theories only when and how these are required. I use a lot of Maslow's motivational theory in my decisions, as well as behavioural situations within recruitment and selection – which many times is really and truly based upon experience and understanding the potential of the person in front of you. The most crucial aspect that I use, however, is always the organisational culture because, honestly speaking, no matter what theories one may seek to adopt, nothing beats actually understanding the organisational culture and working within this culture to achieve results. (PM6)*

*Yes, we have adopted theories to guide our selection, management and career development, reward systems and motivation and training of employees. (PC4)*

Participants mentioned a range of sources from which knowledge and information were sought including websites (e.g. CIPD), textbooks, Harvard Business Review, online discussion boards, benchmarking documents, LinkedIn, colleagues, conferences, people management magazines and internal sources. This trend was common in all three countries, and many perceivably considered

these sources as *reliable* and *credible*. Two Polish participants in particular mentioned consulting Harvard Business Review, while only one interviewee made reference to relevant research databases like EBSCO and Emerald. On the other hand, all interviewees declined from replying in the affirmative about whether they were likely to use HR-based research in their decision-making process:

*Textbooks, as I think, they offer reliable information. Internet sources are easily available; however, one should ensure reliable sources are being used. (PM1)*

*[Internal sources] are not only well researched etc. but are also considered through the 'eyes' of our company's culture, which makes the application of such best practices more straightforward and in line with our values. (PM7)*

*We benchmarked specific topics from different sources. One was consultancy services we engaged. Another one was available information from different best practices in different industries. (PC1)*

*More often we try to draw best practices by looking at other industries and letting them to inspire us for innovation in our industry. (PC3)*

Moreover, most of the participants emphasised their lack of time in trying to dig into more academic material in obtaining the necessary evidence. In addition, participants whose background is more into specific fields of HRM and who have a more academic background were more careful about the reliability of their sources (PM1) than those whose background is in HRM as a consequence of their career path (PM6):

*I think they are two well-recognised institutions, but I cannot say they are the best source. I would prefer to have access to a library which had peer reviewed journals. (PM1)*

*I am fully aware of HR best practices that are available but do not use these. My approach is more of a hands-on. (PM6)*

When asked to what extent they are likely to seek HRM academic research in adopting their practices, the participants clearly indicated they do, except for the two participants who have been the longest in HR (PM5 and PM6):

*Occasionally – usually at the onset of a new HR strategic project, for example, a new talent management programme, ethics programme or during a continuous improvement activity to improve the effectiveness of an HR initiative. (PM6)*

*I am aware that HR research exists; however, I did not have the opportunity to carry out such published research. (PM7)*

#### 4.5.2. Closing the gap between research and practice in HRM

There was unanimous agreement from all participants in all three countries about the gap between research and practice in HRM. They clearly pointed out that there are serious gaps between what students are taught about HRM and the practice underlying HRM; however, participants were more likely to shift the responsibility of this gap onto those whose responsibility it is to form the educational basis of future HRM practitioners and managers and their weakness to impart the practical implications of the research itself:

*Yes, I would say that there is a phenomenal gap between what students of business learn and the real world of work, and this gap is mostly the result of the fact that business situations, particularly within the field of HR, have to be lived and experienced to be learnt.*

*It is relatively straightforward to be able to quote specific cases that have been witnessed or seen through the years, yet HR management focuses a lot upon decision-making, and making the right decisions normally involves experience over and above theoretical research. (PM6)*

*I strongly believe in learning by doing, as well I am follower of the idea to have more case studies at Universities (personally I did my MBA based on the case study method). So, if there is no hands-on approach in the learning process, it is difficult to expect good to great results. (PC1)*

*The main gaps are that there is lots of work that is done in the real world that adds no value but needs doing because of organisational inefficiencies or internal politics. Also, attitude and resilience is extremely important for success at work and lots of students don't get any training in that area. In addition, communication skills of students are not at the right level such as assertive communication, ability to provide feedback, ability to argue and debate without using arguments and personality, ability to negotiate, and negotiation skills. (PP3)*

*Yes, there is a gap, in fact two of them. First one arises from general differences between theory and practice, and it's actual in any field, in my opinion, due to the fact that the best knowledge comes from practice. Second gap comes from issues which are undertaken during studies – based on theories and sometimes also outdated theories. Labour market, companies and reality of work changes so quick now that studies do not schedules keep up with the changes. (PP8)*

Likewise, all participants indicated that the best way to close the gap is to provide internships that would allow future practitioners to reconcile research/theory with practice:

*More job shadowing/work placement opportunities. More HR practitioners speaking to students about the realities they face on a day-to-day basis. (PM7)*

*In Croatia, there is no specific college which can prepare students for the HR world. By studying economics or psychology, students get no or very little practice. (PC5)*

*I would close the gap by partly changing studies schedules and providing more possibility to 'use' the reality – by providing lessons with practitioners, possibility of interns in different kind of companies and departments (big and small ones, polish and international – to give a chance to observe differences between them). Also, by assuring learning of some computer systems used in HR field (e.g. SAP HR) – even on basic level. What is more, universities could provide research done on HR, e.g. on HR tendencies, and show how to interpret them. (PP8)*

## 5. Discussion

Our investigation from both studies elicits a number of important points.

First, the findings provide empirical evidence that irregular beliefs in critical HR practices prevail among managers involved in people management. Our findings from Poland, Croatia and Malta corroborate those from more socially and economically developed countries such as the US, Canada, Belgium and the Netherlands (Barends et al., 2015; Rynes et al., 2002; Sanders et al., 2008). The prevalence of irregular beliefs was further attenuated in specific flawed items, namely 'Participation at work is a great source of employee motivation and satisfaction' (86.0%), 'Work-family

strategies benefit both the family and the workplace' (84.0%), 'There are very specific personality types or styles for getting key leadership functions fulfilled' (79.0%), 'Typical interviews can deduce an interviewee's aptitude and motivation if the interviewer is well trained' (74.0%), 'Experience in running typical job interviews increases the chances that the selection decision improves' (73.3%) and 'Tests of mental ability are the best predictors of future job performance' (69.3%), among others. In line with Rynes et al. (2002), selection and recruitment emerged as the HR domain with the highest level of irregular beliefs.

Second, our findings provide evidence, at least to some extent, that as experience in managing people increases, the prevalence of irregular beliefs increases. Additionally, the interviews revealed that experience in decision-making was given much more weight than researched evidence; a similar claim is made by a number of scholars (Pfeffer & Sutton, 2006a; Rousseau, 2012). Lawler (2007) had claimed that a good number of managers dealing with people lack any form of formal education in HRM. Our investigation lends weight to this claim: Most of the managers in both studies did not have a degree or educational background embedded in HR. Also, the proportion of those opting for the 'Don't know' category in Study 1 ranged from 1.7% to 26.3%, thereby implying lack of knowledge in areas that are directly or supposedly directly linked to their professional role. While we believe that professional expertise is an integral part of a people management role, this has to be coupled with formal evidence-based training and education in HRM. The implication of this may be reflected in the quality of decision-making (Rousseau & McCarthy, 2007) and the company's performance (Rynes et al., 2002).

Third, participants claim to have little awareness and/or available time to consult academic research on HRM and are more ready to access popular HR magazines in line with other studies (e.g. Barends et al., 2015; Cohen, 2007; Mazza & Alvarez, 2000). The inability to use evidence-driven theory as opposed to experience is fuelling further the gap between research and practice, an issue that has been raised by various scholars (e.g. Lawler, 2007; Pfeffer & Sutton, 2006b; Rousseau, 2012; Yates & Potworowski, 2012). It transpires from Study 2 that theory is being transmitted in a way with least impact on the work of managers and without concern for contextual relevance of the evidence. Managers, while aware of the gap, also highlight their insistence that academics ought to get closer to the real world and provide training embedded in real work settings. This implies putting back evidence into more evidence-based HRM, meaning that the existing mass of management research needs to be de-scaled into readily accessible and updatable repositories. As Hughes, Bence, Grisoni, O'Regan, and Wornham (2011) put it, 'the link to practice is important because it is about the question of how close academics are able to get the reality of management in their research' (p. 40).

## 6. Conclusion

We have provided clear, albeit limited, evidence of the state of managers' beliefs of HRM practices that are supported by research for three EU countries. Notwithstanding some differences between the three countries, overall the phenomenon of HRM irregular beliefs and the reasons underlying the lack of evidence-based practices were similar and indeed converge with those of other countries. Competitiveness is partly tied to the investment and maintenance of an organisation's human capital. In countries such as the ones studied in this investigation, this becomes more paramount, given the relatively limited financial resources, unique contexts and their need to keep up with the level and standards of organisations in more advanced European countries.

Despite these findings, four limitations of our study are worth

noting. First, with no sampling frame available because of data protection issues, we could not use a stratified sample, and the likelihood of a purposive sample being representative is generally low (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2016). Second, this study targeted major companies, and hence, further research is required to determine whether the patterns are generalisable to other smaller companies. Third, we did not delve to explore whether the differences are attributed to national cultural differences despite the fact that all three countries have commonalities. Fourth, if more than three countries and a larger sample size were utilised, it would have been possible to conduct multilevel analysis and investigate whether country impacts the nested differences.

Moving forward and beyond this study, we emphasise that this paper is not a judgement about the ill fates of managers' beliefs regarding people management issues. Rather, it is a call, along with similar studies, albeit in different and more developed countries, to sum up our resources and provide more space for discussion between researchers and practitioners. HR and OB are very rich both in theory and in research. This knowledge loses its currency if practitioners fail to recognise it as potentially adding value to their mode of working (cf. Rousseau & McCarthy, 2007); likewise, researchers will be ineffective if they fail to communicate the practical implications of their findings to practitioners to adopt and use (Goodman & O'Brien, 2012).

We selectively bias ourselves here and call for a re-approachment of academics and researchers towards the real world of practitioners. It is after all our duty to be of service to such professional groups and organisations to enhance and improve their work practices. For managers dealing with people issues within these countries, understanding the research, theory and the link to practice is essential if they are to develop more evidence-based decisions in the context of people management. While it is true that part of the challenge lies with practitioners becoming more critical and knowledgeable of the available evidence, it is equally true that academics and researchers have to do their part.

In line with previous callings in this direction (e.g. Rousseau & Barends, 2011), academics ought to increase the accessibility of the best available evidence, help in developing practitioner reflection and critical thought and support the development of a questioning mindset by enabling the active learning of users. As researchers and academics, we should therefore understand more deeply the reasons for the transmission of such irregular beliefs (see e.g. Saunders & Bezzina, 2015; Weick, 1995) and the lack of application of evidence-based practices. Such answers will support the effort to make practitioners, especially those in developing economies and with least advanced HRM, to be more effective. Further research is therefore required to determine whether such irregular beliefs prevail among academics and researchers specialising in HRM and, in turn, the impact this has on students and practitioners. Hence, on the one hand, researchers are duty bound to provide the impetus towards improving the learning experience of future managers dealing with people. More studies are therefore required to understand how managers are being trained and how much of their learning they are able to apply. On the other hand, managers need to move out of the office to the shop floor and learn to critically evaluate their own practices and the evidence they tend to utilise.

What does all this entail in practice? There is comparatively little research about the manner knowledge passes between academics and practitioners in the management field. Charlier, Brown, and Rynes (2011) suggest that research needs to explore the best ways to teach EBM principles and practices such that students both learn the material and value that learning. Perhaps, we should further ensure that management education highlights both the 'what is' and the 'what should' be (cf. Van Aken, 2004). Therefore,

an equal emphasis should be given between the theoretical underpinnings of a phenomenon and its applications. From our experience, most management teaching has remained unfortunately strongly attached to the theoretical stance. There is a considerable need for management education and training institutions that prepare practitioners in the field to make the leap towards contextualising research and theory into practice. HRM programmes and training should not be solely an exposition of theory and evidence but should also provide opportunities to link such theories to practice and to make them more context relevant. One may after all need to challenge the formal system of education or ensure that management education is blended with other important forms and experiences of learning. This entails the proper use of the best scientific findings, the ability to attend effectively to organisational data, to adopt a reflective judgement in decision-making and assess one's ability to take on-board stakeholders' views and perspectives. Further investigation therefore requires us to understand better to what extent managers adopt such styles, the various constraints they encounter in adopting them and ways to improve their effective roles in managing people issues at work. In other words, research should now be targeted at closing the gap rather than simply highlighting its width.

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