

TIMES ONLINE

From: The Sunday Times Business Career
March 21, 2010

Times Online

So where is your evidence?

We may think we know what goes down well in the workplace. The trouble is there's very little proof that it works



After the truth: managers are advised to look at the evidence in detail - like the team from CSI - before they take any decisions

Carly Chynoweth

RECOMMEND? (4)

It is hard to argue with the suggestion that happy workers are more productive or that cutting stress at work will reduce absenteeism. And any job candidate who told an employer he couldn't do his best work in a team would be unlikely to make the shortlist.

After all, employee engagement, stress reduction and the power of teamwork seem such good sense that few people stop to think further.

There is only one problem. There is little or no evidence to back up any of these ideas.

Ten years after the establishment of evidence-based medicine — the idea that clinical decisions should be based on research rather than tradition or “common sense” — it is time for managers to start applying the same thinking to management practices, said Rob Briner, professor of organisational psychology at Birkbeck, University of London.

“With these fads there's often something useful in them — say 5% to 10% — but 90% is nonsense,” said Briner. However, finding that 5% means taking the time to sift through the evidence underpinning the idea rather than jumping on the latest bandwagon with fingers crossed.

“I tell managers that they can make decisions fast, but they will probably be wrong,” he said. “You have to look at the evidence in detail and consider it in the context of your own organisational needs.”

Take teamwork. It is widely accepted as the ultimate goal in productivity but in many situations people actually do a better job on their own, said Briner.

“There's a general assumption that teams are good and that structuring people into teams is good because they will pull together and work better than when they are on their own.

“Actually there is a lot of evidence that individuals making an effort on their own produce higher quality results. It depends on the task.”

In some situations, such as surgery in an operating theatre, working together is critical. On the other hand, no matter how many times a company refers to its sales staff as a team they are rarely anything other than

EXPLORE CAREER

- GRADUATE
- SENIOR EXECUTIVE
- RECRUITER FORUM
- TOP 50 WOMEN
- BEST 100 COMPANIES
- CAREERS IN

Job Search

Find your next job with Times Online Jobs

Keyword:

Select

Industry:

Advertise a job

THE TIMES
Be the first
Register [here](#) for an exclusive preview of our new website

VIDEO



Things you shouldn't do in a job interview

PODCAST



Redundancy: what are your rights?

Podcasts: Employee rights and employer rules

Understanding the basics

GRADUATE CAREERS

[NEWS](#) [JOBS](#)

The latest graduate vacancies from [milkround.com](#):

- Uniformed Services
- Local Government & Civil Service
- Management
- Consultancy
- Business Intelligence & Market Research

individuals pursuing their own goals.

Nor does Briner have much time for the concept of employee engagement — the idea that organisations should make staff feel happy and involved with corporate goals. “Broadly speaking, just because people are happy at work does not mean they will perform better. The strongest link really is that if you perform well at work you feel more satisfied, so employee-engagement enthusiasts might have it the wrong way round,” he said.

In other words, there is not much point in trying to make people happy in the hope that they will work better, although helping people to do their job better might improve their mood.

A lot of companies’ assumptions about stress and absence are also wrong, Briner said. Most tend to assume that stress is a big cause of absenteeism and that reducing it is therefore the magic bullet. Research shows that — in most companies, most of the time — very few absences are caused by any form of long-term debilitating illness.

“The evidence says that to make a difference to absence you need to look closely at the internal evidence — for example, who is off sick, which departments are they from, is it a small number on long-term sick leave or is it clustered round Mondays and Fridays,” he said.

Any response can then be tailored to your company’s circumstances. For example, if the problem is a workplace culture that tolerates people taking a day off for minor reasons, requiring staff to have a formal meeting with their manager when they get back after even one day away can remind everyone that the company does notice what is happening.

Emotional intelligence is another fad with little research behind it, despite its increasing prominence in psychometric testing for recruitment and career development, said Briner.

“If you look at whether it makes a difference to anything in work, the answer is not really. [Research evidence on] whether it makes people better managers is very unclear, particularly if you control for other personality variables such as extroversion ... for some people in some jobs for some kinds of performance some of the time it might make a bit of a difference, but that’s a mile away from saying that emotional intelligence is wonderful in organisations. You have to be careful about when and whether these things make a difference.”

Think of choosing management practices as you would when buying a camera, Briner suggested. You start not by looking at the most fashionable or most popular, but by thinking about what you need it to do — fit in a pocket, take high-speed action shots, cope with the beach and so on — and then look for a camera that does those all things well. If you want a small camera for snapshots, you ignore the salesman who tells you that one with three lenses and the size of a toaster is better.

Then, of course, you have to know how to use it. Just as even the best camera will deliver poor results if used badly, so management practices that are backed up with sound evidence — for example, performance appraisals — will do little good unless done properly.

“The principle is effective but it’s not being done well,” said Briner. “It’s like antibiotics that are not taken according to the instructions.”

How to test a management trend

THERE are four elements to keep in mind when assessing whether a management trend will work in your office, said Rob Briner, a professor of



Find your future here

graduatecareer.com, the new website with articles, advice and resources for graduates

WSJ: CAREERS



Articles from our sister site WSJ.com:

- Building a Global Legal Career
- Thinking Happy Thoughts at Work
- Services to Stop Our Online Dawdling
- Building a Global Legal Career
- Thinking Happy Thoughts at Work
- Services to Stop Our Online Dawdling

You may be asked to subscribe to read certain articles

GREAT PLACES TO WORK



Is your firm the best?

Find out who you should be working for with our list of the top employers



Masterclass

Postgraduate degrees: study your way out of recession

organisational psychology.

- Internal evidence. Analyse data from performance appraisals, management information systems and staff surveys. Look for clusters of information round particular issues rather than examining results in isolation. "You also need to look at whether the answers people give are actually reflected in their behaviour — and then whether this behaviour actually makes a difference to customers," he said.

- Personal and team experience. Combine the evidence you gather internally with your own experience and that of your colleagues. Trust your own knowledge of what you have seen or done before: don't assume that external experts know more.

- External evidence. This can be difficult because academic journals, where research is published, aren't easy to read or find. Unlike health professionals, who can now draw on systematic reviews that monitor research in various areas and update advice accordingly, there is no single place that pulls together all the relevant information.

Be aware that advice from external experts, such as management consultants, may be coloured by their efforts to sell their services. "It's like a doctor going to a drug company and saying 'I have a problem, what do you think?' Well, they are likely to recommend their own products," said Briner.

- Ethics. Think about the implications of the idea. Even if it does work, it is not necessarily the right thing to do. For example, setting unachievably high standards for your top performers may well encourage them to work even harder, but if they are the sort who refuse to miss a goal they might burn themselves out trying to get there.

PRINT EMAIL  SHARE   

HAVE YOUR SAY

Would you like to post a comment? Please register or log in

Login |

[Terms and conditions](#)

ALSO IN CAREER

- [Book Extract: You must check out investors](#)
- [No need to wear tweeds](#)
- [Now try the John Lewis way](#)

ALSO IN BUSINESS

- [FSA hits insider dealer with £956,000 bill](#)
- [We'll demand millions if Goldman is guilty, says Brown](#)
- [Stunted growth leaves Bank facing interest-rate dilemma](#)