

Evidence-Based HR: Benefits, Challenges and the Role of Leaders

By Prof. Rob Briner

ADCLOD, IIM Ahmedabad hosted a research webinar titled “Evidence-Based HR: Benefits, Challenges and the Role of Leaders” by Prof. Rob Briner, Professor of Organizational Psychology at Queen Mary University of London, on July 13, 2026.

Professor Rob Briner’s talk offered a clear, practical framework for what it actually means to be “evidence-based” in HR and management. He argued that evidence-based practice is not a technical or statistical exercise reserved for scientists, but a process that mirrors how people already make important decisions in everyday life — illustrated through a simple example of choosing a restaurant in an unfamiliar city when someone else is paying for dinner. Just as a good diner would consult multiple sources, weigh their trustworthiness, and take a structured approach rather than acting at random, good organizational decision-making follows the same logic.

At its core, evidence-based HR is a process for answering two questions more accurately: “What’s going on?” and “What can we do about it?” Briner outlined three guiding principles that distinguish this approach from how most organizations already operate. First, decisions should draw on multiple sources and types of evidence — stakeholder views, professional expertise, internal organizational data, and external or scientific evidence — rather than relying on a single source, much as a good doctor would never diagnose a patient using only lab results while ignoring the patient’s own account of their symptoms. Second, gathering and using evidence should follow a structured, explicit process, since politics, incentives, a bias toward action, and strongly held (often wrong) beliefs otherwise crowd out good decision-making. Third, practitioners should focus on the most trustworthy and relevant evidence available, since in an age of abundant data, more information is not automatically better — untrustworthy or irrelevant evidence can lead to worse decisions, not better ones.

Briner walked through this in practice using a common problem: high employee turnover. Rather than jumping straight to solutions, the evidence-based process starts by asking answerable questions (where is turnover happening, who is leaving, how does the rate compare to similar organizations), gathering evidence across the four sources, assessing how trustworthy and relevant each piece of evidence is, and only then forming a conclusion about whether — and what — the real problem actually is. Solutions are addressed only after the issue itself is properly understood, a discipline he noted most leaders and HR teams find genuinely difficult, since there is a strong organizational pull toward jumping to action.

He identified several barriers that keep organizations from adopting this approach, including common misconceptions (that it is too time-consuming, incompatible with innovation, or simply a rebrand of people analytics), the pull of management fads and fashions, and what he called “HR or management theater” — activities like unconscious bias training or annual performance appraisals that create the appearance of addressing a problem without actually solving

it, drawing a parallel to post-9/11 airport security theater. On the question of time taken, his answer was direct: evidence-based practice “takes the time you've got” — even a five- or ten-minute structured attempt at understanding a problem improves the odds of a good decision compared with skipping the process altogether. The goal, he emphasized throughout, is a better-informed decision, not a perfect one.

On leadership specifically, Briner noted that evidence-based practice can be threatening to leaders who associate their authority with having the answers, since it invites others to question assumptions using data. Leaders who embrace it, by contrast, role-model it by asking for evidence, remaining humble about what they don't know, and being willing to stop initiatives that aren't working — even ones they personally championed. He closed with a memorable, tongue-in-cheek list of the real alternatives organizations often default to instead: eminence-based HR (deferring to the most senior voice), vehemence-based HR (loudest opinion wins), eloquence-based HR (best talker wins), resemblance-based HR (copying competitors), and several others — underscoring how much of everyday organizational decision-making runs on something other than evidence.

In the Q&A, Briner addressed several practitioner concerns directly: that qualitative signals like employee sentiment and trust are legitimate data, not lesser evidence; that evaluating evidence for bias is best done collaboratively since people are poor at spotting their own blind spots; that rapid change and innovation are not incompatible with evidence-based thinking (innovations, he argued, still come from evidence rather than appearing out of thin air); and that the hardest part of implementation is often simply convincing already-successful leaders — who typically rose through action, political skill, and relationship-building rather than evidence use — that a different approach is now needed. His suggested opening move: ask leaders whether they want to do everything possible to help the organization succeed, and let the case for evidence build from there.

In short, evidence-based HR reframes good management as a disciplined process rather than a personality trait or a data-heavy technical exercise — one built on using multiple sources of evidence, following a structured approach, and prioritizing trustworthiness over volume, with leadership playing a decisive role in whether that discipline takes hold.

YouTube video link to the talk: <https://youtu.be/VNZmSjAauBE>