


COMMENTARY

Bridging from I-O to small business owners: Entrepreneurship as an allied discipline

Gavin Williamson 

University of Tennessee, Knoxville, USA
Email: gwilli50@vols.utk.edu

Entrepreneurship is the business school discipline traditionally most concerned with the study of small businesses, particularly *new and small* businesses (Davidsson, 2016). As such, our field can lend insight into three questions Zhou et al., (2024) posed. First: *Is the focus on small businesses warranted?* The answer to this question is a resounding yes; research on I-O/HR topics in small businesses is worth doing, and interest in these topics is growing among entrepreneurship researchers. Second: *What are some potential solutions to improve the practical applicability of the “practical implications” sections?* I argue that authors should adjust for known barriers to the adoption of HR practices when speaking to more resource-constrained audiences, and the entrepreneurship literature offers useful paths to doing so. Third: *Should we have more “bridge” journals recognized as part of top-tier academic lists?* Entrepreneurship researchers and entrepreneurs are working to develop bridge outlets capable of reaching small business professionals at scale, and I-O psychologists can contribute to these outlets, even as they are unlikely to be considered “top tier” any time soon.

In sum, I-O psychologists seeking to narrow the science–practice gap by focusing on small businesses have an ally in the field of entrepreneurship. As an entrepreneurship researcher, I will share some thoughts, informed by the trends of our field, on the three questions posed above.

Is the focus on small business warranted? Yes!

I-Os wishing to conduct more research in small business contexts have an audience of entrepreneurship researchers sympathetic to the value of this work. Entrepreneurship researchers have long held that small businesses are a worthy population to study, in no small part due to research finding that most new job creation (in the United States, at least) is the result of new and small businesses growing into old and large ones (Haltiwanger et al., 2013). Beyond simply being interested in the subject, entrepreneurship researchers have laid a foundation of research at the intersection of HR and entrepreneurship that I-Os can build upon to tackle small business issues and close the research–practice gap.

Research on I-O/HR topics in small businesses is a long-running and ongoing endeavor in entrepreneurship research. Although entrepreneurship researchers have studied HR in small businesses for decades (see for example Cardon & Stevens, 2004; De Kok & Uhlaner, 2001), efforts have been galvanized by the introduction of the *joiner*, the (aspiring) employee of a new venture, as a major character in the entrepreneurship literature in the last decade (Roach & Sauermann, 2015). Since 2015, contributions in top management, labor, and entrepreneurship journals have examined recruitment (e.g., Engel et al., 2023), selection (Roach & Sauermann, 2024), compensation (Burton et al., 2018), careers (Sorenson et al., 2021), work design (Van Lancker

et al., 2023), team formation (Lazar et al., 2022), and many other HR topics in the contexts of nascent small businesses specifically. The unique challenges facing new and small businesses (more on this in response to the next questions) represent key scope conditions for these studies, and the literature they collectively comprise represents a fertile jumping-off point for I-Os interested in studying small businesses.

Improving practical applicability: work around resource constraints

It is dismaying to see small business owners and managers propounding that our work makes “no sense to actual humans” (as if researchers are not people too), yet there are reasons for hope. Simply put, HR is not the average small business owner’s primary, or even secondary, focus, and there may be no one else focusing on it on staff. A study by ADP, Inc. found that less than 30% of small businesses have an owner, manager, or employee that is formally trained leading the HR function (ADP, 2019). I once interviewed a woman who, earlier in her career, had been the first HR professional hired at a Silicon Valley startup, and she was their 80th employee. Thus, the HR function in a small business is usually run by a self-taught, reluctant HR manager who deals with problems *ad hoc*, is primarily concerned with compliance, and may not be fluent even in industry parlance for HR, let alone academes. In my view, I-Os should not be overly discouraged by Zhou and colleagues’ results but should instead see it as a sign of hope that papers are seen as having any utility by this audience.

To improve practical relevance, I would argue that we should focus on generating evidence-based insights that *resource-constrained* small business owners have the *resources* to act on. As Zhou and colleagues noted, many of the best practices I-Os have developed painstakingly over the years are simply too complex and/or costly for most small business to implement at a net benefit (Cappelli & Neumark, 2001). Fortunately, we already know many of the barriers to managers implementing evidence-based advice (constraints on knowledge and financial resources being leading culprits; Johns, 1993; Terpstra & Rozell, 1997; Wyatt et al., 2010), and we can design practical takeaways around those barriers if we so choose.

For example, consider structured interviews, which meta-analytic evidence shows are among the best selection tools in our arsenal (Sackett et al., 2022; Schmidt & Hunter, 1998). Almost every small business owner who does not simply hire a friend or relation will conduct interviews for an open position, but many, if not most, will be unstructured. Why? Because very few small business owners have the needed time or knowledge to conduct a job analysis, run a validation study, or any of the other steps prior to the interview itself that make an interview *structured* (Wyatt et al., 2010). As a result, studies finding that small businesses are more profitable when they implement structured interviews are unlikely to be persuasive to small business readers, given the prohibitive expense and knowledge gap.

However, a practical implications section that identifies ways to make interviews more (if not completely) structured using *cheap techniques that any thoughtful person can employ* may be more persuasive. For example, O*Net can serve as a tool for identifying key KSAOs when custom job analysis is implausible (Spector, 2020), and AI tools may help small business owners develop more effective interview questions and score them more fairly than they might otherwise (Campion & Champion, 2023). O*Net and many AI tools are cheap, user friendly (Williamson, 2024), and can help an untrained individual come to conclusions that are at least reasonable, if not ideal. It may feel counterintuitive for I-Os who are used to pushing for best practices to encourage practitioners to “cut corners,” but when local knowledge and monetary resources are insufficient to implement best practices, the perfect is the enemy of the good.

In the entrepreneurship literature, we are accustomed to the subjects of our research having limited resources; in fact, many theories originating from our discipline seek to explain how severely resource-constrained entrepreneurs accomplish as much as they do (e.g., bricolage theory; Baker & Nelson, 2005; effectuation theory; Sarasvathy, 2001). Relevant to HR, entrepreneurship researchers have studied, for example, the benefits of costless acts like

displaying passion and “hustle” during recruitment (Kindermann et al., [in press](#); Lewis & Cardon, 2020). These displays probably cannot fully make up for the inability to follow best practices, but they are helpful when best practices are too costly or complex to implement. Similarly, low-cost facsimiles of best practices (e.g., using O*Net; Spector, 2020) stand to be very useful to small businesses. I-Os seeking relevance to small businesses should identify these alternatives where possible, and entrepreneurship research on resource-constrained actors can help identify “pain points” where such alternatives are needed.

Bridge outlets: reaching small businesses

Entrepreneurship researchers have long been faced with the challenge of disseminating knowledge through the noise of a multibillion-dollar industry marketing (often dubious) assistance to entrepreneurs (Hunt & Kiefer, 2017). Bridge journals play a key role in answering this challenge. Although there are many bridge journals specific to our discipline, one exemplar is *Entrepreneur & Innovation Exchange* (EIX for short), which primarily publishes articles (usually of 3,000 words or less) that translate entrepreneurship research and explain practices useful to entrepreneurs. Well-respected entrepreneurship researchers and successful practicing entrepreneurs contribute to EIX as both article writers and editorial board members, realizing the ideal of researcher-practitioner coproduction. With over 15 million annual page views as of this year (Buday, 2024), EIX is fast becoming an important audience-specific complement to other bridge outlets like *Harvard Business Review*, and its sister publication *FamilyBusiness.org* has a wide reach among the subgroup of small businesses that are family run.

Practically, bridge journals are unlikely to be key to any researcher’s tenure case any time soon, which unfortunately limits incentives to publish translations there. However, for I-Os with intrinsic motivation to disseminate insights to small business owners, outlets like this provide a targeted medium to reach small business practitioners, and they become more well-respected as their reach grows each year. Although I am not a representative of EIX or any other bridge journal, it is safe to say that I-O psychologists would be welcome to submit to outlets like EIX when the implications of their research are relevant to small business owners.

Conclusion

The importance of studying HR in small businesses is already recognized by the field of entrepreneurship, and by discovering and translating practical takeaways that resource-constrained small business owners have the resources to act on, I-Os can produce even more helpful research. I applaud Zhou and colleagues’ advocacy for a turn toward small businesses and hope this commentary provides additional insights that will help other I-Os act on the impetus they sparked.

Competing interests. The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

References

- ADP, Inc. The risky business of ad hoc HR management 2019, <https://www.adp.com/resources/articles-and-insights/articles/aahrm-risky-business-of-ad-hoc-hr-management.aspx>.
- Baker, T., & Nelson, R. E. (2005). Creating something from nothing: Resource construction through entrepreneurial bricolage. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 50(3), 329–366. Doi: 10.2189/asqu.2005.50.3.329.
- Buday, C. (2024). Dick Schulze reflects on EIX and FamilyBusiness.org’s decade of impact. *Entrepreneur & Innovation Exchange*, <https://eixchange.com/content/dick-schulze-reflects-on-eix-and-familybusinessorgs-decade-of-im>
- Burton, M. D., Dahl, M. S., & Sorenson, O. (2018). Do start-ups pay less? *ILR Review*, 71(5), 1179–1200. Doi: 10.1177/0019793917747240.

- Campion, M. A., & Campion, E. D.** (2023). Machine learning applications to personnel selection: Current illustrations, lessons learned, and future research. *Personnel Psychology*, *76*(4), 993–1009. Doi: [10.1111/peps.12621](https://doi.org/10.1111/peps.12621).
- Cappelli, P., & Neumark, D.** (2001). Do, high-performance, work practices improve establishment-level outcomes? *ILR Review*, *54*(4), 737–775. Doi: [10.1177/001979390105400401](https://doi.org/10.1177/001979390105400401).
- Cardon, M. S., & Stevens, C. E.** (2004). Managing human resources in small organizations: What do we know? *Human Resource Management Review*, *14*(3), 295–323. Doi: [10.1016/j.hrmr.2004.06.001](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.hrmr.2004.06.001).
- Davidsson, P.** (2016). The field of entrepreneurship research: Some significant developments. In J. Bonnet, M. Dejardin, D. Bogenhold, & D. Garcia Perez de Lema (Eds.), *Contemporary entrepreneurship: Multidisciplinary perspectives on innovation and growth* (pp. 17–28). Springer.
- De Kok, J., & Uhlaner, L. M.** (2001). Organization context and human resource management in the small firm. *Small Business Economics*, *17*, 273–291. Doi: [10.1023/A:1012238224409](https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1012238224409).
- Engel, Y., Lewis, T., Cardon, M. S., & Hentschel, T.** (2023). Signaling diversity debt: Startup gender composition and the gender gap in joiners' interest. *Academy of Management Journal*, *66*(5), 1469–1500. Doi: [10.5465/amj.2021.1197](https://doi.org/10.5465/amj.2021.1197).
- Haltiwanger, J., Jarmin, R. S., & Miranda, J.** (2013). Who creates jobs? Small versus large versus young. *Review of Economics and Statistics*, *95*(2), 347–361. Doi: [10.1162/REST_a_00288](https://doi.org/10.1162/REST_a_00288).
- Hunt, R. A., & Kiefer, K.** (2017). The entrepreneurship industry: Influences of the goods and services marketed to entrepreneurs. *Journal of Small Business Management*, *55*, 231–255. Doi: [10.1111/jsbm.12329](https://doi.org/10.1111/jsbm.12329).
- Johns, G.** (1993). Constraints on the adoption of psychology-based personnel practices: Lessons from organizational innovation. *Personnel Psychology*, *46*(3), 569–592. Doi: [10.1111/j.1744-6570.1993.tb00885.x](https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1744-6570.1993.tb00885.x).
- Kindermann, B., Hocker, A., & Strese, S.** (in press). Attracted to the hustle? An impression management perspective on entrepreneurial hustle in new venture recruitment. *Journal of Management Studies*. Doi: [10.1111/joms.13011](https://doi.org/10.1111/joms.13011).
- Lazar, M., Miron-Spektor, E., Chen, G., Goldfarb, B., Erez, M., & Agarwal, R.** (2022). Forming entrepreneurial teams: Mixing business and friendship to create transactive memory systems for enhanced success. *Academy of Management Journal*, *65*(4), 1110–1138. Doi: [10.5465/amj.2020.0393](https://doi.org/10.5465/amj.2020.0393).
- Lewis, T., & Cardon, M. S.** (2020). The magnetic value of entrepreneurial passion for potential employees. *Journal of Business Venturing Insights*, *14*, e00193. Doi: [10.1016/j.jbvi.2020.e00193](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbvi.2020.e00193).
- Roach, M., & Sauermann, H.** (2015). Founder or joiner? The role of preferences and context in shaping different entrepreneurial interests. *Management Science*, *61*(9), 2160–2184. Doi: [10.1287/mnsc.2014.2100](https://doi.org/10.1287/mnsc.2014.2100).
- Roach, M., & Sauermann, H.** (2024). Can technology startups hire talented early employees? Ability, preferences, and employee first job choice. *Management Science*, *70*(6), 3619–3644. Doi: [10.1287/mnsc.2023.4868](https://doi.org/10.1287/mnsc.2023.4868).
- Sackett, P. R., Zhang, C., Berry, C. M., & Lievens, F.** (2022). Revisiting meta-analytic estimates of validity in personnel selection: Addressing systematic overcorrection for restriction of range. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, *107*(11), 2040–2068. Doi: [10.1037/apl0000994](https://doi.org/10.1037/apl0000994).
- Sarasvathy, S. D.** (2001). Causation and effectuation: Toward a theoretical shift from economic inevitability to entrepreneurial contingency. *Academy of Management Review*, *26*(2), 243–263. Doi: [10.5465/amr.2001.4378020](https://doi.org/10.5465/amr.2001.4378020).
- Schmidt, F. L., & Hunter, J. E.** (1998). The validity and utility of selection methods in personnel psychology: Practical and theoretical implications of 85 years of research findings. *Psychological Bulletin*, *124*(2), 262–274. Doi: [10.1037/0033-2909.124.2.262](https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-2909.124.2.262).
- Sorenson, O., Dahl, M. S., Canales, R., & Burton, M. D.** (2021). Do startup employees earn more in the long run? *Organization Science*, *32*(3), 587–604. Doi: [10.1287/orsc.2020.1371](https://doi.org/10.1287/orsc.2020.1371).
- Spector, P. E.** (2020). *O*NET is a valuable tool for job analysis*. Paul Spector's Blog.
- Terpstra, D. E., & Rozell, E. J.** (1997). Why some potentially effective staffing practices are seldom used. *Public Personnel Management*, *26*(4), 483–495. Doi: [10.1177/009102609702600405](https://doi.org/10.1177/009102609702600405).
- Van Lancker, E., Knockaert, M., Collewaert, V., & Breugst, N.** (2023). Preparing for scaling: A study on founder role evolution. *Journal of Business Venturing*, *38*(4), 106315. Doi: [10.1016/j.jbusvent.2023.106315](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusvent.2023.106315).
- Williamson, G.** (2024). Using O* Net to study the intersection of entrepreneurship and employment: A primer. *Entrepreneurship Theory and Practice*. Doi: [10.1177/10422587241227627](https://doi.org/10.1177/10422587241227627).
- Wyatt, M. R., Pathak, S. B., & Zibarras, L. D.** (2010). Advancing selection in an SME: Is best practice methodology applicable? *International Small Business Journal*, *28*(3), 258–273. Doi: [10.1177/0266242609350815](https://doi.org/10.1177/0266242609350815).
- Zhou, G., Campbell, L. N. P., & Fyffe, S.** (2024). Quantifying the scientist-practitioner gap: How do small business owners react to our academic articles? *Industrial and Organizational Psychology*, 379–398.