

‘Storytelling’ found to be fundamental to HR analytics, new research reveals

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‘Storytelling’ as a practice is a frequently-used and effective tool for HR analytics professionals, new research from Trinity Business School, UCD and Maynooth University has revealed.

According to the research, undertaken by Na Fu, an associate professor of human resource management at Trinity Business School, and Anne Keegan, Full Professor of Human Resource Management at UCD and Steven McCartney, Assistant Professor, Management & Organisational Behaviour at Maynooth University, HR analysts regularly engage in storytelling to aid them in doing their jobs.

Having undertaken 15 semi-structured interviews with HR analytics professionals, the researchers identified two key uses for storytelling practices: storytelling as showcasing, and storytelling as curbing.

“Showcasing HR analytics involves translating the results and insights from HR analytics to different stakeholders to take actions, that is, revising, updating, or initiating new policies,” Dr Na Fu explains.

“Meanwhile, curbing entails the careful curation of projects in the short term, motivated by a desire to protect the quality of implementation, employee interests including privacy, and to establish solid analytical principles based on sound data and systems which their organisations do not currently possess,” she adds.

According to the researchers, HR analytics professionals regularly engage in these two seemingly contradictory aspects of storytelling to develop sustainable and legitimate HR analytics.

Reflecting on the findings of the study, Dr Fu said:

“This research also sheds invaluable insights to other professionals who are interested in thriving at work. In order to do so, business professionals need to navigate and combine the showcasing (e.g., promoting a new practice, an intervention, or changes) and curbing (e.g., slowing down, refocusing). Curbing is not to simply step backward, but to prepare our organisations, people and professionals like us, and to get ready for the showcasing - to make it happen.”

Dr Steven McCartney added:

“Although much has been made about the need for analytical skills in roles such as HR Analysts, this paper illustrates the sometimes underrecognized skill of storytelling in performing HR analytics tasks in practice while highlighting its complexities.

Typically, when we think of the role of the HR Analyst, we are immediately drawn to the multitude of

analytical skills required to perform complex data analysis. However, we find that storytelling is also a multi-faceted concept involving more than just translating and selling HR analytics to stakeholders. This is an important finding for firms as they continue building HR analytics capabilities.

One key takeaway from this research is that firms need to invest in developing HR analytics experts who not only have a fundamental understanding of the technical elements but also, the ability to balance the complex challenges of HR analytics through storytelling.”

The paper, The duality of HR analysts' storytelling: Showcasing and curbing, published in Human Resource Management Journal, can be accessed here (<https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/1748-8583.12466>).

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