

## Neuroscience: should HR be about art or science?

Elaine Wilson



Elaine Wilson is a Managing Consultant based at ASK Europe, Cranfield, UK.

**H**R has always triggered debate. While this has often focussed around the theme of “friend or foe” – the function’s tightrope walk between organisations and employees – the emergence of neuroscience as an informing discipline may resurface an older “nature of HR” debate: art or science? Although HR and L&D have not been total strangers to applied science disciplines – such as psychology and behavioural economics – its engagement with them has often been at a “dabbling” level: picking and choosing elements that offer either evidence or hope. But the roots of neuroscience, which the OED defines as “any of the sciences that deal with the structure or function of the nervous system and brain”, lie firmly in the life sciences. Its findings, and the work that produces them, come from an arena where scientific rigour and validity are not bonuses but touchstones.

Neuroscience’s promise to HR is powerful, particularly in relation to enhancing learning, workplace relationships and interactions. It offers the ability to cite scientifically proven accounts of human brain behaviour to an organisational function often criticised for lacking hard evidence. A 2014 CIPD report, *Neuroscience in action: Applying insight to L&D practice*, cited examples: “the importance of sleep

to memory and learning, the benefits of spacing learning sessions, and how creativity is enhanced by tasks that require unusual mental connections”. David Rock’s SCARF model offers the promise of improved leadership where leaders understand their behavioural impact in five social domains the human brain perceives as “survival issues”: status, certainty, autonomy, relatedness and fairness.

The danger for HR lies in this very potential. A discipline eager to prove its impact and value may not approach these “findings” as scientists would, promoting “solutions” that rest on “evidence” that is not yet fully proven, rather than correctly stating that “further research is needed”.

HR practitioners should read not just books, websites and blogs from their own discipline that embrace neuroscience, but also authors in the scientific community. They might also consider a 1974 Caltech speech, *Cargo Cult Science*, by physicist Richard Feynman:

In the South Seas there is a cargo cult of people. During the war they saw airplanes with lots of good materials, and they want the same thing to happen now. So they’ve arranged to make things like runways [. . .] to make a wooden hut for a man to sit in, with two wooden pieces on his head to headphones and bars of bamboo

sticking out like antennas—he's the controller—and they wait for the airplanes to land. [. . .] It looks exactly the way it looked before. But it doesn't work. No airplanes land. So I call these things cargo cult science, because they follow all the apparent precepts and forms of scientific investigation, but they're missing something essential, because the planes don't land.

As an arena in which some practices are already condemned as “messing with people's heads”, a phrase coined by Dr Steven Berglas, long-standing Harvard Medical School's Psychiatry faculty member in an article warning of dangers in executive coaching. HR might bear in mind the words of CIPD chief

executive officer, Peter Cheese, from a podcast with David Rock, when he said the function had “over the last decade or so [. . .] become very obsessed by process”. While the benefits of neuroscience lie partly in the “facts” it provides, HR must remember to take on board a scientific process along with the scientific knowledge. Companies must ensure research findings have been subjected to diligent scrutiny and validation before they are acted upon.

### About the author

As Managing Consultant at ASK, Elaine Wilson has specialised in organisational and leadership development for over 20 years,

working with global organisations across sectors as diverse as pharmaceuticals, IT and oil and gas. Responsible for account management with ASK's portfolio of existing clients, her particular expertise lies in working with individuals and groups to facilitate the journey towards authentic leadership practice. Elaine's experience encompasses the full range of OD consultancy from system and structure design to individual development. Her early career was spent in the UK finance sector in a number of HR and Management Development roles, and her “in company” experience has proven invaluable when supporting her clients. Elaine Wilson can be contacted at: [amelia.watts@gingermaypr.com](mailto:amelia.watts@gingermaypr.com)