The Internet and I-O Psychology: Lifeless Mummy or Sleeping Giant?

Michael M. Harris
University of Missouri-St. Louis

It has been a few issues since my column appeared here. I am sorry about that, especially since I really enjoy writing this column and learn a heck of a lot from doing it. And most surprisingly, I have discovered that a good number of people actually do read this column. (Of course, most of them are friends who I pay to send me e-mail!)

In April of 1999, my Practice Network (PN) column about the Internet and I-O psychology was published. At that time, the Internet hype was growing and there was considerable “buzz” about the large number of 20-something-year-old multimillionaires. But, in addition, there was also considerable worry about the “Y2K” problem. I still remember waking up in the middle of the night on January 1 wondering if the world still existed. (Do you remember what you were doing that night or were you too inebriated to remember?) Just reminiscing about the good old days. Say, what do you think people will say about the late 1990s 10 years from now? Will people be listening to “oldies” songs glorifying the Web? I remember that just a few years ago I wondered if in the future many of the university buildings would be empty reminders of the days when we met face-to-face in the classroom. Times have sure changed in many ways, not the least of which concerns the use of the Internet.

If you compare all of the hype and predictions about the Internet, you would think that the Internet has waned in its importance. After all, no one seems to be getting rich with it anymore, one reads about a lot more Web sites shutting down than opening, and when was the last time you heard about a friend or colleague accepting a job at an “Internet” company? Do such companies even exist anymore?

Interestingly enough, my April 1999 PN column entitled “I-O Psychology. Com—The Internet and I-O Psychology” attracted attention from several corners, such as my children seeking ways to earn money from me, friends who I paid $20.00, and graduate students to whom I assigned the column as required reading. All of that activity further sparked my interest in this area and continues today to spur my research and practice interests. Naturally, when it came time to write my PN column, it seemed reasonable to revisit this topic 3 years later and assign the new column as required reading for
friends who owe me money, graduate students struggling to complete our PhD program, and of course my children who like to earn extra money by working for me.

As usual, I contacted several I-O psychologists and enlisted (OK, begged for) their help in determining just what the effect the Internet is having on our field. I received e-mail replies from four individuals. The questions I asked were the following:

1. How has the Internet changed the way you practice I-O psychology compared to how you practiced I-O psychology 5 years ago?
2. In what new or innovative ways do you think you will be using the Internet in the near future?
3. When I wrote my column several years ago, there were quite mixed opinions about the effect of the Internet on I-O psychology. What effect(s) do you think it will have on our profession in the next 5 years?

I summarize their comments, along with my own reactions, next.

**How Has the Internet Changed the Way You Practice I-O Psychology?**

As you probably noticed, the question doesn’t ask whether the Internet has changed respondents’ practices—it asks how it has changed their practice of I-O psychology. The answers I received indicated that indeed, respondents’ practices had changed in certain key ways. Clearly, consultants are responding to client demands that the Internet be used for selection, 360-degree feedback, and other I-O products. In turn, respondents indicated that there are some important implications of this. As one respondent phrased it, traditionally, we have focused on the assessment of “short-listed” candidates or the “postrecruitment” phase. However, I-O psychologists are now often involved as part of a multidisciplinary team which includes recruitment agencies, marketing experts, and of course, information technology (IT) specialists. Another respondent noted that the current effect of the Internet is driving changes in selection processes, rather than selection content. Although the basics of test development and validation have remained the same, key issues such as project management, security, and cheating (e.g., who is the test-taker in an unproctored test) have become new challenges. Another challenge in this regard noted by a respondent is that the Internet has increased client expectations regarding the speed with which work is completed. As he noted, clients increasingly believe that “Internet = Speed,” which affects all aspects of development and implementation, thus challenging the standards for good practice.

In a different vein, one of my respondents emphasized that the Internet enables him to reach a much broader audience via e-mail and to communicate much more effectively to that audience. Second, the Internet has enabled
him to gather, analyze, and disseminate relevant data far more effectively than in the past. Finally, the Internet has enhanced his ability to learn from other colleagues and peers, through use of e-mail and Web sites. In brief, the Internet has enhanced the ability of I-O psychologists to gather, analyze, and share information and data far more efficiently than in the past.

I think what all of this means is that I-O psychologists have tremendous opportunities and tremendous challenges. The opportunity is to use some powerful Internet tools to more quickly and efficiently gather data, analyze this data, and disseminate this data. The challenge is to continuously prove our worth and to perform our work within tight time constraints.

**In What New or Innovative Ways Do You Think You Will Be Using the Internet In the Near Future?**

One respondent talked about how the Internet can be used to foster developmental experiences for employees. He mentioned potential experiences ranging from using online chat sessions to “stay connected” to technology-facilitated projects, and so forth. He also mentioned using the Internet to post information about job projects, task forces, and similar opportunities within his organization.

Another respondent mentioned future innovations in assessment, such as simulations (see: http://www.aon.com/us/busi/online_svcs/hr_tools/leader.jsp for an interesting in-basket simulation). He indicated that much will depend on technological advancements, such as bandwidth and connection reliability. Other suggestions included that future use of the Internet may enable various nonobtrusive, innovative measurements of decision processes, for example, by measuring which Web sites are examined and for how long. Finally, the ability to link databases and assessment tools, from the recruitment stage through performance management and training stages (and I would maintain even beyond, including postdeparture), was mentioned by a respondent as a future innovation. I think this innovation is particularly promising from an I-O psychology viewpoint and makes considerable sense. There is no reason, other than technical feasibility, as to why HR processes cannot and should not be linked to one another. Business Process Outsourcing also argues for a similar model (Harris, 2001, in press).

**What Effect(s) Do You Think It Will Have on Our Profession In the Next Five Years?**

One respondent asserted that the impact will “continue to be profound.” To me, that sounds more like a dynamic giant than a lifeless mummy! He continued by stating that with the greater ability to gather and analyze I-O data we will have to become far more effective in disseminating information to create change. In fact, I would go so far as to say that managers and
employees may feel even more threatened than ever by this data and therefore even more resistant to change. Thus, as is well known, people use a variety of defense mechanisms to resist change and ignore important information. So, the challenge in the future may be how to foster and nourish organizational change in light of even greater resistance. Another respondent felt that increasing use of the Internet will mean that I-O psychologists will need to adopt more of a consultative role and less of a “tester” role. Perhaps a good comparison here is to the travel agent, where it has been argued that the travel agent’s role will change from ticket sales to consulting about travel plans. Finally, a third theme in the answers I received was the need to adapt to an “Internet environment,” where there may be less standardization of practices, worldwide locations rather than a single testing location, and other possible differences.

**Conclusion**

I believe that the Internet is going to have an increasingly important role in the field of I-O psychology. I therefore urge all I-O psychologists to stay abreast of developments in this area. If nothing else, a lack of knowledge of Internet advances and applications will lead to a perception on the part of customers and clients that we are out-of-date and behind-the-times. (If you are interested in a paper that reviews practice and research in the area of Internet testing and recruitment written by Lievens and Harris (in press), please send me an e-mail [mharris@umsl.edu], and I will be happy to provide it to you).

What do you, my reader, think will be the future of the Internet in I-O psychology—a lifeless mummy (http://www.guardians.net/egypt/mummies.htm) or a sleeping giant (http://www.sleepinggiant.com.au)? Please drop me a note via e-mail (mharris@umsl.edu), even if it is just the phrase “lifeless mummy” or “sleeping giant.” By the way, even though I don’t always acknowledge your e-mail in my column, I definitely enjoy hearing from my readers—so please drop me an e-mail with your comments, reactions, and suggestions.

Finally, I want to thank the following individuals for their help with this column: Dave Bartram, SHL; **Jeff McHenry**, Microsoft; **John Scott**, APT, Inc., and **Evan Sinar**, DDI.

**Postscript**

I received several responses to a previous column I wrote on terrorism (“From the Halls of Montezuma to the Shores of Tripoli—Is There A Role for I-O Psychology in the War Against Terrorism?”), which appeared in the April 2002 issue of *TIP*. Perhaps the most passionate reply was from **Jim Morrison**, who urged us to prepare for disaster service and volunteer when an opportunity permits. He suggested that you contact your local Red Cross Chapter to inquire when the next Disaster Mental Health Service I program will be scheduled in your locale or state. (Jim facilitates a 2-day American Red Cross...
Disaster Mental Health Service program.) **Jack Jones** and **David Arnold**, of NCS Assessments, have authored an interesting “white paper” on the role of psychological testing to help select trustworthy and safe employees. Other people also sent e-mails, some of which I failed to save, but I want to thank all of those who wrote in about that column. I think we as I-O psychologists have much to offer in this arena, and I encourage all of you to extend your help in combating terrorism and making this world a safer place to live!

**References**


Harris, M. (April, 2002). From the halls of Montezuma to the shores of Tripoli—Is there a role for I-O psychology in the war against terrorism? *The Industrial-Organizational Psychologist, 39*, 114–117.
