

Scherbaum studies the world of work

Dr. Aldemaro Romero Jr. *College Talk*

“My interest in psychology has evolved over time. My parents owned a small business when we were young, and we saw firsthand some of the challenges and issues of managing organizations, managing the people in the organizations, hiring, firing; and it always got me curious.” That is how Dr. Charles Scherbaum, a native of Anchorage, Alaska, explains how he became interested in psychology as a career.

After growing up in Seattle, where he obtained his bachelor’s in psychology from the University of Washington, he completed his master’s and doctorate, also in psychology, at Ohio University and became an assistant professor in the Department of Psychology of the Weissman School of Arts and Sciences at Baruch College, CUNY.

It was while he was a student at the University of Washington that he took a course in industrial and organizational psychology, and it just “clicked” for him. “Originally, I wanted to be a computer science major—I loved the math, I loved the science piece of it, the rules, the logic—and I found a way of blending many of my interests together. I consider myself very lucky to have discovered it in an area that not many people choose to pursue, but it’s been quite enjoyable,” says Scherbaum.

Scherbaum explains what Industrial/Organizational (I/O) psychology is all about. “We can think about I/O psychology as the application of psychology to work, which means that we believe in an evidenced-based practice, much as they do in medicine and in other areas of management. For us, the data doesn’t always speak the truth, but certainly it gives us a much better sense to make decision when we live in volatile, uncertain, and chaotic environments, where everybody’s got an opinion, and it’s hard to tell which opinions are good.”

One of the most important functions of I/O psychology is to study the value of talent. “The notion of talent in today’s economy is paramount. Anybody can lease an airplane, anybody can lease a factory, anybody can have work done overseas—you really



Dr. Scherbaum at his office.

can’t replicate people and the intangible values they bring,” he says.

And colleges and universities are not so very different. “Higher education brings together so many people with so many diverse backgrounds. It’s a different kind of beast, but certainly we see a lot of the same issues. I know, for example, one of the things that educators are thinking about quite a bit is culture change and how to build a culture that’s inclusive, that’s globally-focused. How do you move the ship a little bit, especially when it’s a big ship? These are types of issues that we wrestle with all the time. They’re certainly not easy to deal with,” says Scherbaum.

Change is important in today’s world, yet many people feel uncomfortable with it. “I would say many people are allergic to change because change

is hard, especially in institutions where, by their very nature, people expect consistency. If you were to work for Amazon or IBM today, you wouldn’t expect consistency over the long term, because things are constantly changing. Academics and healthcare, I would say, are some of the last industries where you really have stability. Even though change is all around them all the time, there are still expectations of stability, which makes change even harder,” says he.

Something we consumers are exposed to all the time is surveys by companies from which we buy products and services, and that is also the case within big organizations. But are they really useful? “With surveys, the key is having a positive culture. If management and employees trust each other, I’m going to be willing to give you honest feedback on

how things are going in an organization. If you think about what a survey is, it’s a listening tool, a way for management to listen to what’s going on,” explains Scherbaum.

I/O psychology has become so important that most large organizations have entire teams working in the area. “At the end of the day, I/O psychologists help to create structures in organizations and processes that bring in the right people and retain them, environments that bring maximal productivity, engagement and profitability for the organization and help the leaders do a good job.”

One wonders whether we are doing the right thing by rewarding people for doing the job we expect them to do. “The idea of rewarding people for their behavior is a classic psychological idea: the law of effect. If I want something to happen again in the future, I reward it, and it increases the likelihood that they’ll do it again,” says he.

Scherbaum has also worked on how environment—and not genes—is responsible for some of the differences we find in test scores between men and women. “Most of our research over the last decade has been looking at whether you can develop tests that reduce score differences but still relate to job performance, and we’ve found that you can.”

When asked to explain people’s apparently unpredictable behavior in the stock market, Scherbaum explains, “If you’re a big hedge fund investor, you just need the tiniest edge, and you can make quite a bit of money. You don’t need to predict that much of a movement to have an extremely good day in the market. What we found was that some of the reports of the market and the way that people were collectively feeling were related to how the market did the next day, which makes sense, because back then the market was people. They were certainly taking information and data in, but there’s a gut feel that also goes along with it.”

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