People Analytics at the Crossroads: Four Claims for a Sustainable Course Correction

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Introduction

Research in the field of people analytics is at a crossroads. The research field sees itself as practical and aims to enable evidence-based personnel decisions that complement organizational heuristics, intuition and empirical knowledge by providing a robust, data-driven basis for decision-making with the help of seemingly intelligent use of technology (Pfeffer and Sutton 2006a, 2006b; Schafheitle et al. 2020; Weibel and Schafheitle 2018). However, in the following review, we will demonstrate that the field, so far, largely failed to fulfil this claim and has developed only limited practical benefits. The transfer of research-based findings into practice requires a considerable amount of translation - be it in terms of the prevailing value orientations, theoretical frameworks, the choice of research questions or transferability to different contexts (Rousseau 2006). For this reason, we argue in the following four theses that central theoretical assumptions and research approaches should be systematically scrutinized.

Addressing fundamental ontological and epistemological questions can open up new perspectives for the field and decisively advance scientific progress in people analytics. Ontology is about the question of what exactly is being researched in people analytics and which phenomena are the focus. Epistemology is about the question of how and in what way knowledge about these phenomena is gained.

In contrast to a transparent debate, an ontological openness is currently hindered by the dominance of conceptual studies and review articles - because these promote the formation of so-called “echo chambers” and prevent a critical reflection of axioms, levels of analysis and theoretical boundaries to neighboring phenomena. For example, the difference between human resource analytics, people analytics or workforce metrics (Marler and Boudreau 2017) remains unclear, and thus also a differentiated consideration of their interactions and nuances in relation to their embedding in different organizational levels - be it from a leadership perspective, at team level or as an overall organizational process view.

As a result, it also remains epistemologically unclear what consequences these ontological ambiguities have for the empirical verifiability and operationalization of people analytics approaches. Gary Goertz (2006; Goertz and Mahoney 2012), for example, argues that a stringent operationalization can take place in three steps: from basic theoretical assumptions, to the dimensions derived from them, and finally to verifiable indicators. We are convinced that this precision is lacking in current people analytics discourse and should be a central guideline - especially with regard to a forward-looking research agenda and our own aspirations.

The field is therefore at a crossroads and, for us as young researchers, the direction in which it develops is of crucial importance. In this article, we develop four claims that serve as orientation for navigating between a forward-looking research agenda and practical benefits on the one hand and research on people analytics as an end in itself on the other. With the help of the ontological and epistemological deficits outlined below (claims 1-3), we justify how a reorientation can take place (claim 4) that does justice to the original claim of people analytics.

Claim 1: Reflect People Analytics Assumptions Consciously

We begin with a call for the field to explicitly reflect on its value codes and basic assumptions. At present, the debate seems controversial, black and white, with little room for nuance (Weibel et al. 2023). The cause of this state of affairs can be traced back to a lack of reflexivity, which manifests itself in the conceptual ambiguity of the term people analytics (Hüllmann and Mattern 2020). Scientists define the empirical phenomenon of people analytics inconsistently, overlapping and often contradictory.

For example, Levenson (2018) sees people analytics as a "strategic approach" to achieving competitive advantage, while others reduce it to quantitative metrics (Rasmussen and Ulrich 2015) or see it as the basis for qualitative insights (Levenson and Fink 2017). Still others define people analytics as the "application of AI along the HR process" (Böhmer and Schinnenburg 2023) or simply as "an emerging field of research" (Edwards et al. 2022).

A recurring conceptual ambiguity is operational people analytics as the analysis of personal behavioral data with computer-aided methods (e.g. machine learning, artificial intelligence) to automate structured personnel decisions (e.g. recruiting, compensation, performance measurement) versus strategic people analytics to support less structured, strategic decision-making problems (e.g. long-term personnel planning, process optimization, strategic effects) based on the analysis of aggregated, anonymized data.

This ontological ambiguity becomes problematic when people, technology and management are scientifically problematized, as it gives rise to non-commensurable chains of argumentation in the literature (Hüllmann 2022; Lamers et al. 2024).

For example, Giermindl et al. (2022) cite proponents of people analytics (Levenson 2018; Levenson and Fink 2017; Minbaeva 2018), who see people analytics as a "strategic approach" that holistically optimizes an organization, and contrast these arguments with criticism of people analytics, which criticizes the "operational approach" and the evaluation of individuals (Gal et al. 2017; Kellogg et al. 2020). These ontological differences are insufficiently reflected, although they significantly determine the implications. Positive examples are Tursunbayeva et al. (2022), who explicitly differentiate the ontological assumptions of people analytics about people at the analytical level, or Edwards et al. (2022), who explicitly point out ontological differences and explore how assumptions about people analytics dictate the consequences.

Furthermore, Lamers et al. (2024) point out that, in addition to technology and management, the role of humans is underrepresented in ontological discussions of algorithmic management such as people analytics. In relation to people analytics - where humans are explicitly mentioned in the title - the following questions about ontological assumptions of humans and technology are not sufficiently reflected (Table 1):

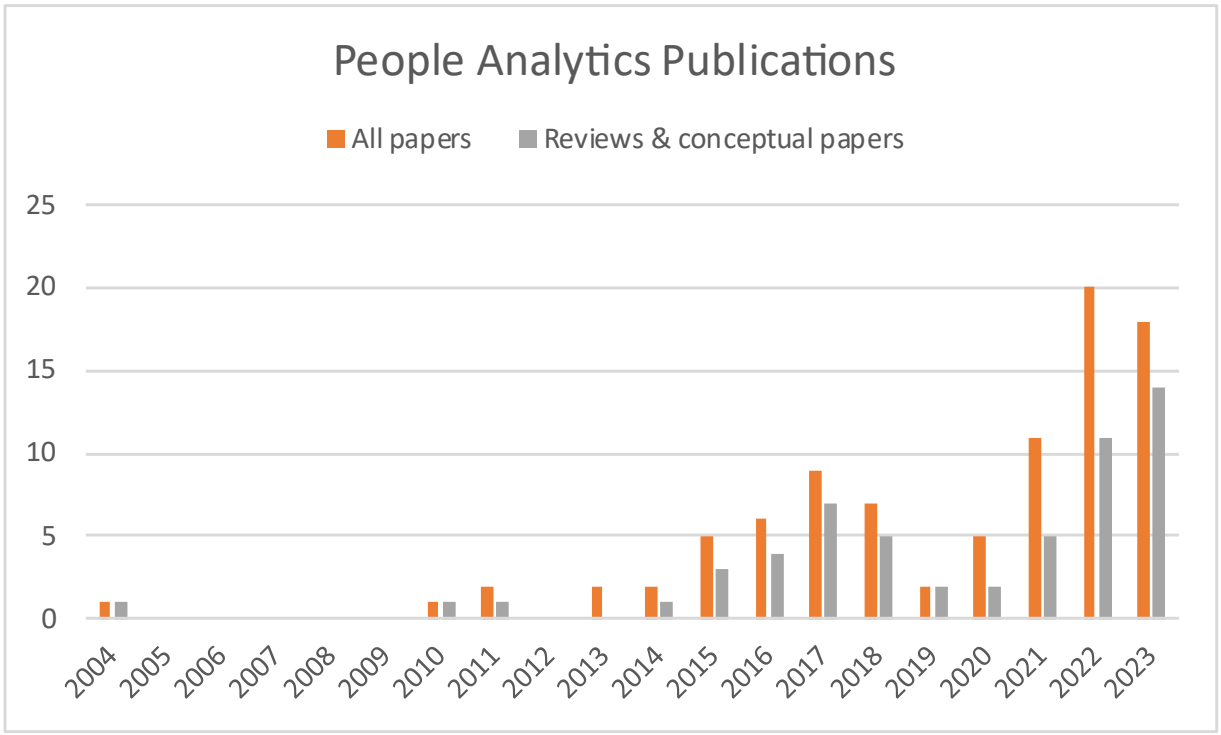
Table 1. Questions about the ontological assumptions of people analytics

People	Is human behavior viewed primarily as measurable data (i.e., does an atomistic view of humans pre-vail)? Is it assumed that future behavior can be validly predicted from past data?
Analytics	Is the ontological basis explicated (definition) and positioned on the analytical level?
Reflection	Are alternative ontologies or approaches taken into account (e.g. constructivist or systems theory perspectives)? How is the engagement with existing literature structured and does it take place? Is the topic of ontology taken into account in the review of existing knowledge?

The ontological ambiguity is therefore more than just a terminological issue - it prevents a systematic accumulation of knowledge and undermines the practical relevance of PA research. This is because scientific findings are closely linked to the underlying understanding of people analytics - including the methods, instruments, data and objectives used (Hüllmann et al. 2021).

In summary: Without explicit reflection on the field's basic ontological assumptions and value codes, it remains unclear which actual perspectives people analytics pursues and which scientific and ethical standards it should meet. This persistent oversimplification is reinforced by the fact that scientific journals in the field of people analytics have so far lacked clear requirements for the disclosure of these basic assumptions.

Figure 1. Share of published people analytics research papers that are conceptual in nature (63%) by 2023.



Claim 2: Take a More Relaxed View on the Impact of People Analytics

Typically, as the research fields of human resource management and organizational behavior show, a (new) field becomes established, especially when research on an empirical phenomenon proves useful and empirically demonstrates that its legitimacy is linked to improved performance outcomes. Jiang and Messersmith (2018), for example, show this impressively in their meta-review of the positive relationship between human resource systems, human resource management practices and numerous performance indicators at individual, team and organizational levels. They illustrate how rich and multifaceted the theoretical-empirical approaches to these relationships are in the field. A similar picture emerges in the area of organizational behavior, for example with regard to the effectiveness of leadership (Legood et al. 2021) and the numerous positive (performance) effects of resilient trust relationships in the workplace (Colquitt et al. 2007).

A decisive advantage of this development is that, beyond the raison d'être and relevance of a field, a variety of methodological and epistemological approaches are being consolidated. This is shown, for example, by Strohmeier (2007) in his review of e-Human Resource Management - an area of research that is often regarded as a precursor to people analytics: "The review reveals an initial body of work from several disciplines, that is mainly non-theoretical, employs diverse empirical methods, and refers to several levels of analysis and to diverse focal topics of e-HRM".

Only after a field has established its raison d'être, relevance and methodological diversity through such positive effects does reflection on possible undesirable side effects typically begin. At this stage, the focus shifts to "dark sides", "down sides" or alternative theoretical models that can be derived from the ontological and epistemological limits of what has been established (see also the emergence of stakeholder theory, which arose as a reaction to critical reflection on the basic assumptions of the shareholder value approach; Ho and Kuvaas 2020; Skinner et al. 2014).

In the case of people analytics, however, this process was reversed - a fact that is also reflected in Table 2: Instead of initially legitimizing itself through positive effects and modes of action across organizational levels and contexts, the field was shaped from the outset by critical narratives, likely reinforced by natural skepticism towards artificial intelligence. Issues such as surveillance, algorithmic control and ethical risks dominated the debate from the outset, even before a robust empirical basis for the actual benefits of people analytics had been established (Edwards et al. 2022; Giermindl et al. 2022).

Table 2. Focus of people analytics academics and practitioners

	Atomistic / Proponents	**Non-atomistic / Critics**
Strategic	Practitioners and a few academics do this	- almost nobody -
Operational	Few practitioners do this	Many academics do this

Our stocktaking is not intended to prematurely dismiss critical voices or immunize people analytics against justified objections - on the contrary. Rather, we would like to use it as a starting point to illustrate the crossroads at which the people analytics field stands, which will determine the direction in which people analytics will move in the future.

On the one hand, the hasty leap into critical reflection has prevented an ontological and epistemological diversity from developing in the field of people analytics - as we know it from the research areas of human resource management or organizational behavior, for example. Instead of developing different theoretical models and competing for explanatory power, the field narrowed down early on to two dominant perspectives: an operational-technical view, which refines scientific criticism with an atomistic view of people, and - presumably as a natural counter-design - a strategic-economic perspective, which primarily takes an overarching view of the design and implementation of people analytics (see Table 2). This early restriction to a few interpretative frameworks limited the conceptual breadth of the field from the outset.

On the other hand, the early focus on the operational-technical perspective in academic discourse has created a considerable legitimacy problem for practice. While other research areas in human resource management (e.g. e-HRM) and organizational behavior (e.g. leadership and trust) were able to substantiate their relevance through demonstrable positive results in organizations and society, people analytics was associated with surveillance fears and ethical risks at an early stage (Tursunbayeva et al. 2022). This makes it difficult to establish the field as a scientifically and entrepreneurially valuable contribution independently of critical discourse.

In summary: In the absence of a solid foundation of "bright side" insights, the academic debate quickly assumed a defensive position, focusing predominantly on risks rather than potential. This in turn left the strategic narrative to practitioners, who steered the discussion primarily from an economic perspective - a pattern that can also be observed in other technology-driven human resources topics.

Claim 3: Involve Neighboring Disciplines Openly

Claim 3 is a call to courageously break up existing echo-chambers. Instead of succumbing to the seductive allure of "new discoveries", we advocate the intensive study of relevant classics from both our own and neighboring fields of research. The competition for novelty and relevance reinforces existing echo-chambers and leads to an epistemological narrowing. Instead of critically examining existing theories, the people analytics field is constantly discovering supposedly new concepts - which have already been discussed extensively in related disciplines, such as management information systems. Current discussions are rediscovering theoretical findings from the management and HR information systems literature of the 1980s and 1990s, such as the tension between transparency, bias and privacy (Bauer et al. 2006; Davis 1977; Davis and Olson 1984; Hubbard et al. 1998); a tension that can be illustrated not only by focusing on technology design, but also on the actual implementation of technology and the psychological consequences for employees.

While most of the literature on management and information systems at this time was primarily concerned with material resource planning, early interdisciplinary work on decision support in human resource management already existed (Byun and Suh 1994; Johnson et al. 2016). Some of this literature focused on research on organizational rather than individual decision making (Keen 1987) and the successful implementation of HR information systems (Dawes 1994; DeSanctis 1986). For example, human resource information systems are implemented along the six phases of initiation, adoption, adaptation, acceptance, routinization, and integration (Cooper and Zmud 1990), the successful completion of which requires user satisfaction (e.g., through many features of the system, ease of use, and usefulness) and support in the form of training, documentation, and social interaction (Haines and Petit 1997). The findings can serve as a starting point for the people analytics field to explore its "bright side" and to examine how such systems can be successfully implemented.

At the same time also the psychological consequences for employees were addressed, including privacy, data security and discrimination (Bauer et al. 2006; Davis 1977; Davis and Olson 1984; Hubbard et al. 1998; Kavanagh and Johnson 2018; Stone et al. 2013). The studies distinguished between structured and unstructured decision problems - a differentiation that is also important for today's people analytics systems (Anthony 1965; Gorry and Morton 1989; Ives et al. 1980).

These historical findings and theories are hardly being taken into account in the current people analytics debate. Instead of boldly thinking outside the box, the discourse is narrowed down to the apparent novelty of digital technologies. For example, parallels are drawn with historical management approaches such as Taylorism and scientific management (Tursunbayeva et al. 2018, 2022) without critically examining the underlying concepts. It would be essential to ask what the theoretical difference is between the classic "time & motion" studies on paper and modern dashboards on a website (Gilbreth 1928). While the technical details have developed rapidly, the social and organizational system remains characterized by inertia. Sociological theories are therefore still relevant to deepen our understanding of people analytics (Adler 2012; Bodrožić and Adler 2022).

Conversely, the information systems discipline has already recognized the need for disciplinary openness and is trying to reframe different phenomena on the basis of the "digital X" critique and make them explicitly connectable (Baiyere et al. 2023) - even if this can sometimes lead to artificial innovation rhetoric.

In summary: The people analytics field should ask itself the central question: Is this really a new phenomenon - or is the familiar simply being presented in a new guise? Van Geffen et al. (2013) show how these questions can be addressed in the context of disciplinary openness. To this end, we provide examples in Table 3. The left-hand side shows which discourses are already taking place, while the right-hand side shows new aspects of people analytics.

Table 3. What's new about People Analytics?

Old aspects of People Analytics	**New aspects of People Analytics**
Technology focus	
▪ Decision support systems for human resources (Byun und Suh 1994; Johnson et al. 2016). ▪ Implementation of human resource information systems (Dawes 1994; DeSanctis 1986; Haines und Petit 1997) ▪ Structured and unstructured personnel decision problems (Mason und Mitroff 1973) and „strategic personnel decision problems" (Keen 1987) ▪ Impact of operational decision support through HR information systems, e.g. threats to privacy, data security, ethics (Bauer et al. 2006; Davis 1977; Davis und Olson 1984; Hubbard et al. 1998; Kavanagh und Johnson 2018; Stone et al. 2013).	▪ Exponential technological advances (e.g. computing power, storage power, interconnectivity), enabling new phenomena (e.g. online labor platforms) (Baiyere et al. 2023) ▪ More data through comprehensive digitalization of all business functions (e.g. digital trace data), enabling new types of analysis and insights (Hüllmann 2025) ▪ Networked technology (autonomous interactions between information systems without human actors), changing the role of humans (Yoo et al. 2012). ▪ Technology as a "black box" that supports probabilistic and no longer deterministic decisions (Venkatesh 2022)

	▪ Reprogrammability with constantly changing outputs through generative (AI) systems (Yoo et al. 2012)
Organization focus	
▪ Scientific Management (Wren und Bedeian 2006) ▪ Taylorism and „Time & Motion“ Studies (Gilbreth 1928)	▪ Industrialization was “outperformed” by automation (Wren und Bedeian 2006), people analytics is “outsmart” with more and better information (Zuboff 1988) ▪ The homo algorithmico (Lamers et al. 2024) ▪ Data-driven, human-centric and mixed organizational cultures
Summary Comprehensive data modeling of the individual person, who is respected in his or her uniqueness and is not interchangeable (Hüllmann et al., 2025). Technological advances make it possible to do justice to the individ-ual technologically and analytically, as long as there is a declared will to do so. (Meijerink et al. 2026).	

Claim 4: Quo Vadis People Analytics?

Only the synthesis of claims 1 to 3 enables us to formulate a more precise definition of our own argument for people analytics in claim 4: Scientific findings in people analytics will be enduring, relevant and impactful only if they prove themselves in practical application and real-world significance. This is not just about an academic sharpening of the field concept, but rather about the question of which practical challenges can be better addressed through such a specification. In claim 4, we therefore argue for a stronger focus on key findings from “engaged scholarship” (Van de Ven 2007) and action research (Bleijenbergh et al. 2021). This includes in particular an early validation of the relevance and applicability of research questions in close exchange with practitioners, the careful selection of theoretical frameworks and the development of a logically consistent and empirically sound research design. For example, a fundamental difference arises depending on whether people analytics aims to measure individual performance (e.g. through click counts or feedback scores) or to understand collective team dynamics (e.g. through network analyses or observational data) - a basic ontological assumption that significantly influences the types of data collected, their interpretation, and the consequent measures implemented.

If the perspective taken is not disclosed, there is a risk that companies will draw the wrong conclusions - for example, addressing individual failures even though structural problems exist. This makes it possible to make a well-founded assessment of research contributions not only in terms of their scientific quality, but also with regard to their practical applicability and limitations. In order to reduce ontological negligence within people analytics research, authors should explicitly disclose their underlying assumptions - i.e. clearly define what they mean by people analytics. Instead of constantly redefining terms, we advocate critical reflection on existing definitions. A more conscious approach to the basic ontological assumptions could accelerate theoretical progress by addressing the causes of contentious debates and resolving contradictory definitions (McCartney and Fu 2022). We understand this demand as a continuation of the general discussion about fairness and transparency in the context of the Open Science movement. While Open Science primarily emphasizes the disclosure of processes and data, we also call for explicit disclosure of the theoretical and ontological foundations. This not only increases

the comprehensibility of the research, but also makes the underlying concepts and assumptions visible - which both facilitates the evaluation of the research results and strengthens their practical relevance.

The strategic perspective should be more concerned with the micro-levels of the organization - in other words, with the question of how people analytics influences the individual as a central organizational actor. The operational perspective, on the other hand, should focus on the aggregation level, i.e. how individual analyses can be transferred to teams or the organization as a whole.

To defuse the epistemological dilemma, researchers also need to clarify how people analytics differs from earlier concepts - such as personnel information systems. Of course, we are not claiming that nothing has changed since the 1980s (Table 3). We share the widespread fascination with people analytics and seek to support its advancement—provided that such progress is grounded in theory.

Another aspect should not be neglected: the ethical-normative value schemes that underlie people analytics and the researchers, consciously or unconsciously. As Wilkinson and Fay (201 1) systematically demonstrate, the research fields of HRM, Organizational Behavior, Industrial Relations and Industrial Democracy are each based on different philosophical assumptions about how people behave in organizations and how they should be seen and treated. In research practice, however, these ethical foundations are often not explicitly named or critically questioned - this makes their application more difficult and increases the risk that technocratic solutions are prematurely regarded as objectively correct. It can easily happen that unspoken power relations or value imbalances are unintentionally reinforced - a risk that is further exacerbated by unexplained ontological and epistemological assumptions.

As researchers, we must recognize that we are dwarves standing on the shoulders of giants. It is insufficient to jump on the "hype" around people analytics - instead, we need to reflect on contextual differences and qualitative innovations and explicitly articulate our ontological position (Baiyere et al. 2023). Otherwise, there is a risk that "everything and therefore nothing" will be labeled as people analytics (Baiyere et al. 2023).

Consciously reflecting on these basic assumptions helps avoid three central pitfalls:

- discarding valuable prior knowledge merely because it is not part of today's buzzwords,
- failing to recognize what is really new - and why, and by using terms without reflection,
- producing "scientific nonsense" (Markus and Rowe 2023).

Finally, we recommend moving away from the current overreliance on literature reviews. The prevailing "review-mania" is, in our view, unsustainable. Rather than adding to the growing body of theoretical reviews, the field urgently needs more empirical, design-oriented, and practice-driven research to meaningfully advance people analytics.

Conclusion

The challenges in people analytics cannot be solved without recognizing the different ontological assumptions about people analytics. We call for research to refocus on understanding the essence of people analytics rather than fixating on superficial measurements or mere outcome reports. Clarity and completeness of evidence are central to people analytics practice, so science should meet the same standards. Adherence to these standards can help avoid echo chambers and facilitate the transition from stagnation to impact and practical relevance. In this way, the cumulative knowledge of people analytics can be further developed in a targeted manner.

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