

IN MEMORIAM

Frank L. Schmidt (1944–2021)

Frank L. Schmidt was born on a dairy farm outside Louisville, Kentucky, on April 29, 1944, the oldest of six children to Swiss German parents with a grade-school education. Life on their farm was hard but adventurous. Schmidt described his teenage years as full of play and experimentation. His parents were so busy that he had, as he put it, the “privilege and freedom to raise himself.”

He went to a private Catholic high school, mostly paying his way from part-time jobs. He entered Bellarmine College in 1962 as a biology major, but became interested in applied psychology, especially psychological measurement, graduating cum laude in 1966. He attended Purdue, earning his master’s (1968) and PhD (1970) in industrial psychology.

His interest in measurement and data analysis complexities began with his dissertation, which showed that regression weights estimated on small sample sizes performed more poorly than simple equal weights in prediction. He developed the important insight that psychologists were routinely reading more into their data than was in fact there. This persistent theme motivated much of his work, including the development of meta-analysis. His articles on measurement error, range restriction, and critiques of statistical significance testing emanated from his desire to detect and correct lies that data tell.

At his first faculty job at Michigan State University, he met John (Jack) Hunter, with whom he began a prolific, impactful collaboration that lasted until Hunter’s 2002 death. Together, they invented the methods of psychometric meta-analysis. Schmidt’s desire for real-world impact led him to leave academic tenure for a personnel research position with the U.S. Civil Service Commission in 1974. In 1985, he was recruited to the University of Iowa’s Business College, where he retired in 2012. His scientific leadership elevated the stature of Iowa’s management department. Schmidt joined Gallup as a senior scientist in 1993, training Gallup scientists in meta-analysis, psychological measurement, selection, and individual differences.

Schmidt was preceded in death by his first wife Betty and youngest daughter Lisa and is survived by his daughter Stefanie, his son Ronald, and his wife Cynthia.

He believed that the goal of science is to establish universal principles. Schmidt and Hunter’s pioneering development of validity generalization (VG) methods showed that statistical artifacts were responsible for study-to-study differences in cognitive ability tests’ validities. Beyond establishing the central role of general cognitive ability in explaining and

predicting performance, VG methods were used to determine the validity of many individual differences variables and assessment methods. In an epistemological paradigm shift for I-O psychology, VG became the dominant approach for establishing criterion-related validity.

Schmidt’s influential articles included research on selection, bias, utility, job performance, employee engagement, smoking cessation, psychopathology, and corporate social responsibility. But psychometric meta-analysis was his most far-reaching contribution. Schmidt coauthored four widely cited and used books on the technique. Meta-analysis transformed hundreds of fields, where it became the bedrock of scientific knowledge.


Schmidt received many prestigious awards for his significant contributions, including the APA Gold Medal, Division 14’s (SIOP) Distinguished Scientific Contributions Award, and the Dunnette Prize. He also won the Academy of Management’s Distinguished Career Awards for Research in Human Resources and Research Methods, the APS James McKeen Cattell Award, and the SHRM Losey Human Resource Research Award.

Schmidt modeled exceptional mentorship, supporting his intellectual family. Even though he had his own share of personal tragedies, he rallied to those with problems.

Always quick to learn, he had many interests, reading, wide-ranging discussions, hunting, collecting, traveling, and good food and drink. With his vast knowledge about every conceivable topic, mischievous curiosity, gentleness, lack of prejudice, and good humor, he always made an impression.

I once asked him for the adjectives to describe himself. His response: “Persistent, dogged. I keep plodding along. If I think an idea has merit, I keep pursuing it. Also, iconoclastic. I have always liked to challenge the conventional wisdom of the day.”

Schmidt was a paradigm-shifting scientist, a father of modern meta-analytic techniques, and an ardent and intellectually honest researcher of individual differences. He leaves behind a legacy that will continue to shape the future of psychology and management, but also more broadly, science in general. He offered an elegant and quantitative way of knowing. His legacy will live in those whose intellects continue to be shaped by the ideas that he introduced.

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