

# Umbrella for Research into Human Resource Development (HRD)

LIDEWEY E. C. VAN DER SLUIS

Vrije Universiteit

What may be the future of research in the field of HRD? That question was raised during the closing session of the European HRD Conference in May 2006. As a member of the discussion panel of this session, I was offered a challenge and an opportunity to share my views on this briefly. In this article, I would like to elaborate on this, like other members of the panel, in this special section of the journal.

To preclude any confusion by what I mean by HRD, I will first give insight into what I understand by HRD. Then, I will recall the need for research on learning and development in today's world. After that, four themes will be put forward that could offer avenues of future HRD research from a strategic perspective: diversity, vitality, professionalism and innovativeness. These four themes seem to reflect the major challenges organizations have to deal with in their HRD practice. For each of these themes, research questions will be explored. This could offer more insight in how to deal with those organizational challenges in this era.

## **Positioning HRD**

Prior to putting forward future lines of research related to HRD, I would like to make clear what I understand by the concept of HRD. In my view, HRD is the development of human resources, or the increase of human capital of organizations. This description defines HRD as the developmental process of individuals in organizations.

HRD can be approached from different levels, based on results on the organizational or the individual level. HRD is often depicted as a development process of employees, related to better individual performance and personal growth. The individual is then the level of analysis. However, HRD is sometimes also seen as a general HR process that takes place in the organization, closely related to organizational development, with development as a result on the organizational level. In that case, the organization is the level of analysis.

---

*Correspondence Address:* Dr. Lidewey E. C. van der Sluis, Vrije Universiteit, Faculty of Economics and Business Administration, De Boelelaan 1105, 1081 HV Amsterdam, The Netherlands. Email: [Esuis@feweb.vu.nl](mailto:Esuis@feweb.vu.nl)

In addition, there are different views on the responsibility of the management of HRD. This deals with the place where initiative is taken for the development of human resources. On the one hand, there is increasing attention towards corporate HRD programmes that facilitate the development of the people in organizations. On the other hand, there is a trend towards more responsibility of employees for their own learning, development, growth and employability. In other words, both parties are taking the lead in terms of managing HRD. Organizations take an active role in managing the development of their human resources while on the other hand employees take their own responsibility by managing their own development and career. These different views on HRD are schematically depicted in Table 1.

### Need for HRD research

Learning is needed more than ever in today's complex world. We know the litany: globalization, changing economies, new technology, increased competition, new products and services, and emerging and interacting disciplines all impose pressures to adapt. This requires the need for learning and calls attention to human resource development on all levels.

In an organizational context, *learning* is the HRD process of acquiring new skills, knowledge, and worldviews. Learning is manifest in new behaviours and follows from (inter)actions on the level of the individual, projects or teams, or on the organizational level, and even on the broader level of shareholders like clients, suppliers, trade-unions and stakeholders.

*Continuous learning* is regularly and purposefully acquiring ever deeper and broader knowledge, developing skills and applying them to new behaviour. Individuals need to take control of their *own learning and development* while organizations need to invest in that learning and stimulate *organizational learning* that could follow naturally, but not as a matter of course, from individual learning.

In a nutshell, individuals need continuous learning to do their jobs well today and tomorrow and to increase their chances for advancement and professional development under changing conditions. Organizations need continuous learning and organizational development to master uncertain and ambiguous environments and to sustain a competitive advantage.

Our focus here is the learning of individuals, the development of human resources. This learning and development takes place within a complex environment where

**Table 1.** HRD from different initiatives and perspectives

		Level of output analysis	
		Individual	Organizational
Initiative	Individual	Self-management of personal development	Team development Project group development Networks
	Organization	Corporate Universities HRD programmes HRD policies and practices	Organizational Development Organizational Learning

many different factors interact with each other. Given this complexity, practitioners and academics in HRD could ask what is to be done to use our resources as wisely as possible to improve the learning and development of employees? Research can contribute to the answer of this question by taking into account prominent themes on the agenda of organizations, like diversity, vitality, professionalism and innovativeness. These themes allude to future research in the fields of HRD, training, management and executive education, coaching, and organizational development and change. The specific topics that bring these themes to the surface for HRD research are discussed below.

### **Topics in HRD research**

Several themes are repeatedly addressed in daily newspapers, in scientific journals, and conferences. Some of these themes are striking in relation to strategic issues that organizations are dealing with and to challenges concerning HRD policies and practices. These can be grouped into four themes that link with strategic issues within HRD research: diversity, vitality, professionalism and innovativeness. For each of these themes, research questions will be explored.

#### *Diversity*

To meet the development needs of today's workforce, companies need to break down the barriers some employees face in achieving advancement. Many studies (e.g. Hawkins, 1991; Kalish, 1992) revealed that women and minorities are frequently excluded from informal development activities such as networking, mentoring and participation in policy-making committees. In addition to outright discrimination, some of the practices that contribute to their exclusion are informal word-of-mouth recruitment for development and talent programmes, companies' failure to sensitize and instruct managers about equal employment opportunity requirements, lack of mentoring and the too-swift identification of high-potential employees (Kalish, 1992).

Barriers to the advancement of minorities and women continue to exist. To improve developmental and promotion opportunities of those groups of employees, several companies like PriceWaterhouseCoopers, Deloitte and ING reported recommendations. Actions that they recommend are, for example, the introduction of a mentoring programme, a statement of philosophy regarding diversity, and executive accountability for improving diversity.

Research that relates to HRD should continue to investigate best practices of diversity policies and practices. In addition, worst practices in this area should be analysed. In today's world of business where many different people live and work together, should we at least understand why there are still differences in developmental opportunities for different categories of workers and, more specifically, for women and minorities? Furthermore, we have the moral duty to offer tools to increase equal opportunities for personal developmental and career enhancement.

Research that relates to diversity should not only focus on differences between men and women. That is only one, although major, discriminating variable that could explain differences in the development of employees. Employees can also be

different in terms of their age, education, cultural background, social status, labour agreement (full time, part time, flexible/freelance), etc.

By realizing that managing diversity in organizations is about: (1) considering differences in terms of those individual characteristics; (2) acknowledging that there are barriers for developmental opportunities for some kinds of employees; and (3) being willing to optimize the advantages that a diverse workforce can bring, there arise many research questions for HRD researchers. To give a few examples:

- How diverse should HRD programmes be to contribute equally to all employees?
- In what way should developmental programmes for managers be differentiated for men and women, black and white, etc.?
- In what way should Management Development Programmes be specified for leaders, executives, professionals and managers?
- What characteristics of managers are needed to manage diversity in the workplace?
- What HRD factors that apply to a diverse workforce make organizations successful?
- What HRD policies make organizations attractive to a diverse workforce? Which lead to the development of a diverse workforce, on the individual, team, and organizational level?
- What criteria should be used to measure development of a diverse workforce, on an individual, team and an organizational level?

### *Vitality*

Employees are expected to play a vital role for the organization by their performance, learning, development, creativity and innovative ideas. For that role, employees need to be physically fit and healthy, but also have energy and strength in terms of their psychological well-being.

Research questions that relate to the theme 'vitality' concern the energy, passion and spirit that employees have to contribute to organizational performance and development. HRD research should investigate and provide insights into the ways organizations can facilitate maintaining the psychological well-being of the workforce and how they can stimulate passion and energy among the workers. Furthermore, HRD research could investigate how this passion and energy can be devoted to the development of a person or the company. So, vitality as a construct of energy and passion of employees is in HRD research both a dependent variable as well as an independent variable.

In order to provide organizations with evidence that investing in the vitality of the workforce is worthwhile and necessary for building sustainable competitive advantage, studies are needed that investigate this. Relevant research questions that relate to employees' well-being and vitality are for example:

- What makes people happy, and therefore vital, in their working environment? What HRD policies and practices can contribute to this?
- What is a good architecture and choreography for HRD programmes that should lead to a more energetic and passionate workforce?

- How can HRD practitioners lower the probability of burnout among employees?
- What formal and informal rules support or oppose work-life balance?
- Do employee services, which employers provide on a tax-free or tax-preferred basis, enhance the quality of employees' work or personal life? How can this return on investment be measured?

Furthermore, the learning climate and the organizational culture seems to be most important for the passion and energy among the employees and therefore for the vitality of organization. These factors of the organizational environment determine the way and extent of keeping the workforce vital and inspired. The general suggestion behind this statement, as also made in current research in the fields of strategic management and human resource management, is that investing in the vitality of employees eventually leads to becoming a learning organization creating sustainable competitive advantage. This suggestion needs to be inquired further. As HRD specialists, we want to know whether the assumed relation between the passion and vitality of the workforce on the one hand and the agility and vitality of the organization on the other hand leads to learning and development on both sides. Therefore, this relationship could be a very interesting link as starting point for future HRD research.

### *Professionalism*

Flexibility, creativity and innovativeness are needed to act and react on the continuous changing business environment. These organizational dynamics drive the organizational need for a professional workforce. Such a workforce consists of employees with characteristics like self-governance, a focus on gaining and developing knowledge, special skills, ethical behaviour, etc. How can HRD research contribute to building such workforce?

Professionalism is a product of the motivation to learn, the awareness of the need to learn, the need for development of knowledge, skills, attitudes and values, the work attitude, and the self-management of learning and development. HRD programmes should therefore focus on enhancing these aspects of the workforce.

The next generation of professional workers is being raised with the awareness of ownership of their own learning, career development, and employability. This will lead to an active role for them in searching for ways to develop themselves.

Research should therefore explore how the HR department can facilitate them in this behaviour and responsibility. Research should investigate how professional development on the individual level can be hooked on to the professional development of the organization. In addition, studies are needed for a better understanding of the effects of participating in professional development programmes or executive educational programmes. Information is needed about the effects of participation in professional development (from individuals, teams, or whole business units), on the individual and the organizational level – the total workforce. Maybe these patterns will increase the differences between professionals who do take care of their own development and those employees who do not so.

Trust among workers is very important to build a professional organization. Trust is about recognition – recognition of each other's qualities and competencies. If

organizations want to invest in the development of their employees, they should start stimulating or building social networks among employees. Such networks are based on the recognition of the qualities of each member of the social network. That is the starting point for individual and organizational learning and development. After that, thinking about training and development can take place, and there the knowledge and insights of HRD researchers and practitioners comes in. How can they contribute to the development of professional workers and a professional organization? That is by providing answers to questions like:

- How can HRD programmes help employees to develop themselves as professionals?
- What are best practices to develop professionals? In a classroom setting, by mentoring or, by e-learning, or by learning by doing? Or via blended learning?
- What are individual or organizational aspects that hinder employees to work and develop as professionals?
- What role can a social network play in the development of a professional? How can social networks contribute to the learning of an employee? How can HR practitioners make use of social networks in organization to enhance the learning of individuals and the organizational development?
- How do cognitive and motivational individual characteristics mediate on-the-job experiences that contribute to professional development?
- How can HRD practitioners contribute to a developing a more professional organization? How can they develop the organizational culture from a culture of excuses towards a work attitude of accountability?
- Professionalism follows from investing in learning and training. A good choreography facilitates learning via creating a learning climate. HRD research should investigate good practices of a learning choreography in organizations that leads to professionalism.

The British Institute of Leadership and Management (ILM) recently conducted a comprehensive survey of 18–24 year olds to find out about their experiences of management and which leaders they most aspired to as role models. Findings from this research suggest that British businesses risk losing young talent because of poor management. Young professionals seek a working environment that offers them the opportunity to learn excellent management skills and behaviour as shown by their own managers. More generally, they prefer a job in which they can learn and develop from good examples of management and professionals that inspire them by showing best practices. In the modern knowledge economy, the demand for talented individuals and professionals in organizations is greater than ever before. There is an intense competition for the best young talents and professionals. The insight from the ILM study opens several clear and urgent lanes of research in the field of talent and professional development. HRD researchers are urged to step into these lanes.

### *Innovativeness*

Innovation drives productivity improvement. It is crucial to organizations to develop new products and services. Innovation is the key word here, together with a focus on

aspects that stimulate the innovativeness of organizations. What those aspects are is still depicted as a black box. However, conceptually, we do know that innovation is a result of creative, learning and development processes, which means an HRD process. Therefore, researchers in the field of HRD are invited empathically to open that black box!

How can HRD research open the black box of these organizational processes that lead to innovation? We learned from earlier studies that creativity, learning and performance are all influenced positively by diversity of a team, the vitality of team members, and professionalism of a project team. In other words, innovation as a theme within HRD research seems to be connected closely with the other three themes that were mentioned before. This suggests that innovation is a function of the diversity, vitality and professionalism of employees.

The prominent process behind innovation is learning. Therefore, HRD research should start with the exploration of learning processes in organizations in relation to innovation. Sessa and London (2006) argue that individuals, by their nature, are continuous learners, whether organizations realize and capitalize on this or not. Some individuals are better at this than others, purposely seeking new knowledge and skills or attempting to transform themselves. And, some organizations facilitate the learning processes within the organization better than others. This suggests that HRD research should offer insight into questions such as:

- Should HRD programmes stimulate the learning and development of *all* employees? If so, what are the best practices for that? If not, what criteria should be used for the selection of the participants? What are the results of this choice?
- How can HRD policies and practices contribute to the learning and innovativeness of individuals, teams and the organization?
- How can we apply our knowledge about learning environments and learning climates towards the body of knowledge around stimulus for innovation?

We know that organizational innovativeness is based on the creativity and drive for renewal of employees. Line managers and HRD managers could stimulate and develop these two aspects of the workforce in line with the organization's goals. Research could examine:

- How HRD managers could support line managers in order to stimulate and train employees in their creativity and innovativeness.
- How organizations can become employers of choice for creative, innovative people, employees with a development focus, young adults from the Y Generation. Recruitment of these people offers developmental opportunities for the organization. However, it also forces the organizations to offer challenges. What kind of unconventional challenges could HRD practitioners think of?

In learning related to innovation, people develop their expertise by broadening and deepening their current skills and knowledge, new areas of application, or new disciplines. Learning that leads to innovation has characteristics such as integrative, experiential, self-aware, reflective, developmental, interactive, collaborative, transferable to new situations, expansiveness, and purposeful. It encompasses such

general skills as communication, analytic abilities, problem solving, decision making, social interaction, global perspectives, citizenship and aesthetic responsiveness. HRD research should investigate how these characteristics can be developed and which of these contribute the most to the value of organizations.

## Conclusion

It is common sense that individuals and organizations need to learn continuously to be ready for changes and create an environment that maximizes their chances for survival and success. From this follows, as depicted in Table 1, that HRD is both an individual and an organizational process and that HRD can be approached from different perspectives. HRD research could therefore cover a wide range of individual topics that play a role in organizations as well as organizational factors that intervene with the development of human resources. This makes HRD research interesting, worthwhile but also very complex.

To give some structure to the research agenda, I distinguished themes that jointly provide an umbrella of future HRD research questions. Our knowledge economy and society in commotion request research in many different topics. Several themes are addressed repeatedly in daily newspapers, scientific journals and conferences. Some of these themes are striking in relation to strategic issues that organizations are dealing with and to challenges concerning HRD-policies and practices. Four themes were distinguished because of their strong link with strategic issues within HRD research: diversity, vitality, professionalism and innovativeness. For each of these themes, we explored related issues in the field of HRD. Several research questions were derived from the explorations. Answering these questions could offer more insight in how to deal with challenges in the field of HRD in the current era.

## References

- Gomez-Mejia, L. R., Balkin, D. B. and Cardy, R. L. (2006) *Managing Human Resources* (Pearson Prentice Hall: New Jersey).
- Hawkins, B. (1991) Career-limiting bias found at low job levels, *Los Angeles Times Magazine*, 33, September.
- Kalish, B. B. (1992) Dismantling the glass ceiling, *Management Review*, 64, March.
- Sessa, V. I. and London, M. (2006) *Continuous Learning in Organizations* (Mahway, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates).
- Van der Sluis, E. C. (2004) Designing the workplace for learning and innovation. *Development and Learning in Organizations: An International Journal*, 18(5), pp. 10–13.
- Van der Sluis, E. C. and Poell, R. (2003) The impact on career development of learning opportunities and learning behavior at work, *Human Resource Development Quarterly*, 14(2), pp. 159–80.