

## **HRDQ Editorial {future publication}**

### **Human Resource Development Quarterly**

#### **HRD: A voice to integrate the demands of system changes, people, learning, and performance**

Darren C. Short  
Chair, ASTD Research-to-Practice Committee

Dale Brandenburg  
Wayne State University

Gary May  
Clayton College & State University

Laura Bierema  
University of Georgia

HRD exists as a part of such larger systems as organizations, the economy, and society. As those systems change, sometimes with the help of HRD, those of us in the profession need to reflect on the implications in order to understand and anticipate, and then to respond. One component of that reflection could usefully include exploring the degree of alignment between the changes and our core beliefs and values.

Consider it this way: changes in major systems place all of the systems' players on a journey: HRD is therefore one of the travelers. Like most journeys, there are challenges and choices. As we travel, we may develop concerns and seek to influence the destination or route; or we may seek to make ourselves more comfortable, either because we are happy with the intended journey or because we believe that attempts to take alternative routes would be futile. Alternatively, we may abort the journey at some mid-point if we feel unhappy or insecure. Let us also not forget the important internal work needed: the journey may be rough, but our state of mind will make or break us as the trip unfolds. To not acknowledge these options, and to not have the dialogue needed to explore them, leaves us passive travelers on a journey designed by others. The old adage "we're lost, but we're making good time" comes to mind as our destiny if we do not reflect on the journey and try to gain more influence over the process.

This editorial updates HRDQ readers on the work introduced in an editorial last year ('Shaping HRD for the New Millennium'). Dilworth (2001) described the intention of the ASTD Research-to-Practice Committee to map the future of the profession. That work is progressing well: the committee has already organized a future search conference and a scenario building workshop. It also has an academic conference paper under its belt, with three articles in ASTD's *Training & Development* journal to follow in Spring/Summer 2002 and then scholarly journal articles. The purpose of this piece is to give HRDQ readers a preview of the progress

made to date; that is, to explore some of the reflection about the journey, its anticipated destination and route, and the HRD position on it.

A major cornerstone of the work was a future search conference (Weisbord & Janoff, 2000), held in June 2001. Co-sponsored by ASTD and the Academy of HRD, the event brought together sixty-four HRD professionals, scholars, business leaders, adult educators, and students; all of whom worked through a two-day process of exploring the past, present, and future for workplace learning and performance. Two of the most significant outputs were a list of common ground statements and a list of the main trends impacting the field.

The common ground statements described areas where participants reached consensus over the role of the profession and core values for those working in it. Those statements were all understood within the context of linking the profession to the organization bottom-line (performance). Although space limitations do not allow for full descriptions (these will follow in future published articles), readers may be interested by the broad headings of the twelve statements:

- Creating synergy between research and practice
- Leveraging technology without losing the human touch and the social component of learning
- Striking a balance between work life and personal life
- Creating humane workplaces worldwide
- Recognizing intellectual capital as the life blood of the organization (the true bottom line)
- Developing a sense of social responsibility
- Embracing globalization
- Embracing multiculturalism
- Partnering in the fundamentally changing role for education
- Managing knowledge and learning effectively
- Developing partnerships and collaboration internal and external to the organization
- Fostering lifelong learning

Participants also identified the main trends influencing the profession. These were: the increasing effects of globalization and diversity in the workplace; the increasing shareholder pressure for short-term profits; and the increasing demand for "just-in-time" learning. Other notable trends included: the move towards the virtual workplace; increasing emphasis on meaning-making at work; the growth in knowledge capital; the increasing rate of change in organizations; and redefinitions of career.

Each of these trends is influencing HRD in different ways, sometimes in alignment with the common ground statements; but other times the trends, or aspects of them, conflict with common beliefs about the profession and core values of many HRD professionals. Such issues are being picked up in a series of articles authored by members of the ASTD Research-to-Practice Committee and due for publication in the May, June, and July 2002 editions of *Training & Development*. Those articles explore the past, present, and future of three trends: the pressure from shareholder value, globalization, and just-in-time learning. Here are brief overviews of the issues:

*Shareholder value.* Future Search participants rated the trend of increasing shareholder pressure for short-term profits as the trend having the most impact on the practice of the profession. The prosperity of the 1990's raised the bar in terms of shareholder expectations for publicly held companies. Increasing shareholder value, i.e., increasing the stock price, became

the mantra for many CEO's and remains, despite the dot-com bust and the Enron debacle, the dominant business philosophy. The trend has been amplified by the liberal granting of stock options to executives and managers. Since options only pay off big if the stock price rises, the interests of managers who receive options grants should theoretically align with shareholder interests. However, some would argue that option-driven-managers have been tempted to mortgage their companies' future to achieve a higher stock price now (Kennedy, 2000). Failure to deliver on projections means bad things happen to those in charge, as evidenced by the CEO turnover rate in the Fortune 500 (Covin, 2001). This stress is transmitted down the line in the form of demands for better, faster execution at lower costs, not to mention the periodic reductions in budget and headcount. .

It is clear that the present emphasis on shareholder value creates tension with a number of the professional values expressed in the common ground statements. Who has time to create synergy between research and practice or maintain a healthy balance between work and personal life? How can we strive to create a more humane and socially responsible workplace when layoffs and downsizing are the norm?

So, what is an HRD professional to do to help create a more desired future? Of course, there are no easy answers, but it is clear that whining and complaining is not the solution (it is counterproductive to imply that your CEO is myopic and stupid). How about a different tact? Let's seek to understand the dynamics of the shareholder value trend, learn how to get inside the head of our CEO to discover how he or she thinks about business results, and then reframe the discussion to find true common ground on how we can add value to the business equation while being congruent with our principles and values. For example, we value the synergy between research and practice. The CEO values the attraction and retention of profitable customers as a driver of business performance, and ultimately, shareholder value. So, can we link the two? As practitioners and researchers, can we partner to investigate, implement, and evaluate a best-practice process such as Customer Relationship Management? Reframing the discussion in this manner is a direction we will explore in future articles and forums regarding the trend of shareholder value.

*Globalization.* The concept of globalization is controversial, and there are many different definitions (McLean, 2001). We define it as the crossing of financial, technical, and cultural boundaries to facilitate a global flow of goods, information, and services. Terminology aside, companies have developed global presence in the past two decades through technological advances and eroding trade barriers.

How does HRD support the international operations of a company? Three clear ways are through: cross-cultural training, global team development, and global leadership programs. Certainly many companies use relocation training to prepare employees for international markets and expatriates for overseas service. There is a growing recognition that a positive relationship exists between cross-cultural communications and effective teamwork and productivity, leading to greater emphasis for HRD on developing global teams. Similarly, the war for global talent is at the highest at technical and managerial levels, leading to global leadership programs.

Through its global activities, HRD professionals can support their company's capacity to move beyond quarterly financial statements to build humane workplaces and maximize the value of technology without losing the human touch and social components of learning. However, potential ethical clashes exist between globalization and the core values and beliefs of HRD professionals, as illuminated by frequent stories of differences between the working conditions of employees in the developed and developing nations (Friedman, 2000; United Nations, 2000;

McLean, 2001). The role for HRD professionals in supporting global activities clearly requires frequent attention to ethical standards, beliefs and values, and that will continue as a challenge for years to come as we strive for a global humane workplace.

*Just-in-time.* The Future Search Conference illuminated the increasing demand for just-in-time (JIT) learning; but, what JIT learning is, how it is implemented, and its implications for the future of workplace learning and performance are only emerging as one perspective on the merging of learning and work. There is little doubt that the demands for JIT learning are market driven – increasing competitive advantage by transferring learning across organizational operations, the shift from the product cycle to the knowledge cycle, access to information that can assist in solving current problems, identification of the right knowledge and to structure it for learning, and learning activities that are modularized and personalized (Krell, 2001; Welch, 2001). These are business demands for learning that result in immediate applications that improve work performance.

We are merely beginning to comprehend JIT learning components and its implications. The general domain of JIT may be considered as “informal learning” as opposed to structured “formal learning” (Ellis, 2001). Thus, an understanding of how informal learning is effectively developed, structured, and used is one important component. Another thread is the application of technology integrated with rethinking the principles of instructional design - for knowledge sharing, for group collaboration, for modularization, and for customization to the individual learner to name a few (Schaaf, 1990). Perhaps the most important construct to emerge is the role of workplace educators to facilitate informal learning processes in *communities*. Such educators, acting as “learning counselors” (Short & Opengart, 2001), support communities to find or create the knowledge needed by their members, select the right means to structure and exchange it, and assess knowledge gain and application.

*Conclusion.* As each of the above three trends have illustrated, demands are being placed on HRD by factors originating elsewhere in the broader system. In most cases, we clearly need to adapt to those changes or we will find ourselves sidelined – one example might be the apparent lack of enthusiasm within parts of the field to grasp the nettle of knowledge management and its links to HRD and e-learning. Yet, we need not feel powerless; options exist to influence trends and, in so doing, to satisfy personal performance and human needs as well as business needs. By being conscious of our professional values, we can have the strength of conviction to speak up for our beliefs and ethical concerns.

To truly influence trends, we must be positioned to have our voice heard. It seems that the best approach is to be active in examining the journey, to anticipate its route and destination, and to reflect on alignment between those and our beliefs and values. We can then use our voice, when needed, to influence the journey in ways that integrate the demands of system changes, people, learning, and performance. The potentials of such an approach are immense as we strive for ethical performance that comes from humane workplaces worldwide and the application of social responsibility.

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