Challenges to the Field of Human Resources Development

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The problem and the solution. Although the future of the field of human resource development (HRD) cannot be precisely foretold, trends and analyses provide us with insight into the challenges likely to be faced by professionals in the field. How we, as HRD professionals, react to these challenges will determine our contribution to organizations and society. This article explores the major challenges identified from within this journal issue.

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The authors featured in this issue of ADHR have viewed the future of human resource development (HRD) through perspectives from their own experiences, from the literature (Chermack, Lynham, & Ruona, 2003 [this issue]), from surveys (Ruona, Lynham, & Chermack, 2003 [this issue]), and from the outcomes of the future search conference (Dewey & Carter, 2003 [this issue]). These views are all experienced within a context of global uncertainty that adds to the unpredictability of the future for HRD. Despite these uncertain conditions, the authors and editors of this issue have identified and explored trends that are having and will continue to have a strong impact on the field. These include balancing the demand for increased shareholder value against value as perceived by other stakeholders, making better use of technology to deliver just-in-time solutions, an increasingly global economy, and the demand for more ethical and socially responsible organizations.

Each of these trends places new demands on HRD. For example, what is the role of HRD in supporting globalization? How can HRD professionals blend technology with human processes to maximize learning? How does social responsibility influence the design and delivery of HRD in organizations?
In this final article, rather than examining the “micro” challenges raised in each article, a look at the macro challenges that run throughout the journal issue are presented. The discussion is framed by the question: What challenges must members of the HRD profession—practitioners, researchers, and academics—face and tackle to make certain that the field survives and thrives in the coming years?

HRD, as a profession, has a choice about how to address the future. HRD professionals can either be reactive in the face of present challenges and risk falling behind the curve, or they can take advantage of the challenges and in so doing bring increased legitimacy and weight to HRD efforts. HRD professionals work in a variety of organizations, responding to different demands, so readers of this article will have different reactions to the challenges we pose. We believe that the future of the HRD profession will hinge largely on the capacity of all HRD professionals, whatever their viewpoints and whatever the focus of their work, to contribute to a critical examination and discussion of the challenges we face and to craft workable and lasting solutions.

Weisbord and Janoff (1995) offered, “To engage in a series of dialogues embracing both hope and despair is to discover that we have real choices. We can throw up our hands and run or we can choose the path of social, technological, and economic innovation” (p. Xi). We invite members of the field of HRD to begin a dialogue concerning the challenges presented in this article. Are these the real challenges facing the profession? Have others been omitted? How do these challenges influence HRD in different organizations, cultures, nations? How do we bring these and other challenges to both the agenda of our field and the agenda of the organizations we serve? In setting out the challenges, we have deliberately sought to be specific and provocative with the intention of encouraging HRD’s multiple stakeholders to join in a spirited discussion on the future of HRD.

Challenges to HRD Professionals

**Challenge 1: Responding to Multiple Stakeholders**

The debate about whether corporations should serve only shareholders or whether they have a responsibility to a wider group of stakeholders who are bound up in the structure and success of corporations is a critical debate. U.S. corporations, operating as they do in a culture of extreme individuality (Hofstede, 2001, as cited in Russ-Eft & Hatcher, 2003 [this issue]), identify most closely with shareholders as the primary stakeholder; continental European and Asian corporations are less prone to this characteristic. Wall Street, with its focus on quarterly results, reinforces the shareholder bias.
One can argue that individualism run to excess is also responsible for the wave of board-level crime and executive malfeasance that has been rampant over the recent past. Of course, not all U.S.-based companies are averse to stakeholder capitalism: Johnson and Johnson’s credo specifically refers to the company’s obligation to health care professionals, employees, and the community and lastly shareholders. Following this lead, corporations are being challenged to balance shareholder-stakeholder interests in new ways.

HRD practitioners are also caught up in the shareholder-stakeholder challenge. Almost every article in this issue deals with an aspect of the shareholder and stakeholder debate. Ruona, Lynham, and Chermack (2003) speak of HRD professionals’ hopes for expanding notions of whom the profession serves, and reframing our work around life-long learning and community outreach. Marquardt and Berger (2003 [this issue]) speak of HRD professionals’ assessing the needs of the global workplace and community, whereas Russ-Eft and Hatcher (2003) put the importance of examining differences in cultural values at the center of developing a global code of ethics for HRD. May, Sherlock, and Mabry (2003 [this issue]) describe shareholder value debates as to whether the shareholder should have primacy over other stakeholders in the business, that is, customers, employees, suppliers, the community, and society at large; whereas Packer and Sharrar (2003 [this issue]) point out that businesses in continental Europe and Japan, unlike those in the United States and the United Kingdom, tend to serve the interests of multiple stakeholders outside the company. HRD professionals are challenged to orient their efforts to multiple stakeholders in several ways.

First, the issue of balancing shareholder value with stakeholder interests is a critical issue for HRD professionals because we are responsible, as Packer and Sharrar propose, for the learning supply chain supporting organizations. HRD professionals cannot blindly focus on shareholder value if we must also respond to learning supply chain stakeholders including primary, secondary, postsecondary, and postgraduate education institutions, continuing education, training and development entities, just-in-time knowledge delivery systems, and other learning solutions both inside and outside the corporations. As the future search participants noted, “intellectual capital is the lifeblood of the organization.” If this is true—if companies are proceeding from manufacturing to “mentalfacturing”—then not to take a strong position in support of the interests of learning supply chain stakeholders is as reckless as it would be for a senior supply chain manager to disregard the various contributors to the manufacturing supply process. The factory will stop when supplies are cut, and organizations will lose productivity and effectiveness to the extent that the learning supply chain is degraded.

Second, the suggestion that HRD orient itself to multiple stakeholders implies that HRD practitioners and academics should promote corporate
accountability to communities and societies. In a personal communication (March 15, 2003), one observer (Gary May, the first person known to carry the title of chief learning officer) put it this way, using the analogy of the three-legged stool: “There are three legs to success in companies: financial performance, meeting customer needs, and employee satisfaction. But the seat that holds the legs together is social responsibility. HRD professionals have to think about influencing all four of these arenas.”

How can HRD professionals take up this challenge? No doubt, there is risk involved in taking a bold position in favor of stakeholder interests, but the risk is greater in doing nothing. Perhaps HRD professionals will be able, as Packer and Sharrar (2003) suggest, to educate the organization on the meaning of social responsibility and its relationship to corporate performance. Although there is no indication that other parts of the world are going to relinquish their more stakeholder-driven approach, trends in the United States complicate the shareholder-stakeholder debate. With the federal government continuing to reduce the proportion of the overall budget earmarked for educational and community-based programs that have provided companies with educated employees and safe and healthy communities, it is possible that larger companies will agree to take up some of the responsibility. Small and medium-size companies generally will be able to afford much less. Clear answers to key questions will bolster such efforts: What will the company’s return on investment be, for example, for supporting local education systems or for supporting exemplary employee health systems? Will there be better support for the learning supply chain if organizations take positions encouraging the wider society to support school over armaments? Additionally, academic HRD programs must work to integrate more effectively with the educational system that supplies students as well as the organizations that will employ graduates and to help students of HRD establish a broader focus and responsibility. A profession dedicated to supporting the learning supply chain and increased awareness of social responsibility may find that the results of its efforts are significant for the profession, the organizations and individuals it serves, and for society at large.

Challenge 2: Measuring HRD’s Impact and Utility

The CEOs and senior management who assembled in one of the eight stakeholder groups at the future search conference (see Dewey & Carter, 2003 for a list of the stakeholder groups) emphasized that the most effective way for HRD practitioners to establish themselves as key players in the development of organizational strategy is to demonstrate how what they do correlates with the productivity and welfare of the company. Although HRD professionals should continue to provide services in areas that cannot be measured quantitatively, for both ethical and professional reasons, the
future of HRD depends to a great degree on the extent to which the value it brings can be confidently measured. We believe that a focus on demonstrating impact and utility will lead not only to access to greater overall influence of HRD on the organization but to a stronger reputation of HRD as a legitimate profession.

HRD’s sphere of interest and intended impact has been expanded from the individual level to also encompass team and organizational levels and has moved from a focus on the performance of tasks to encompass the effectiveness of processes and systems. These changes have happened at a time when organizations increasingly seek links between learning and performance and view knowledge and learning as key differentiators between themselves and competitors. Therefore, over the next decade, linking learning and human process to performance and measuring learning, human process, and the resulting change in performance that helps an organization meet its goals are crucial challenges to the field.

HRD professionals must become skilled systems thinkers who can design and conduct measurement and analysis across the organization and pinpoint the influences of HRD efforts on employee productivity and organizational performance, linking past research results to current practice. HRD professionals must have the skills to identify valid measures of learning and growth, develop meaningful and accurate interpretations while being ever mindful of the myriad of intervening variables that can influence learning and performance curves in work settings. Ethical engagement in measurement work will maintain integrity around the complexity of learning and performance processes, will allow for accountability for HRD failures as well as successes, and will protect against laying shortfalls on the backs of learners and those who facilitate their learning.

The challenge to the HRD field, then, from university programs to corporate departments to consulting and service organizations, is to work toward developing valid metrics based on appropriately complex systems models to demonstrate impact and utility while carrying out those services that are professionally and ethically important but cannot yet be quantitatively measured.

**Challenge 3: Orienting Toward the Future**

As the articles in this issue have illustrated, we know more about the past and the present of HRD than we do about the future. This is to be expected. However, it is a concern how little time HRD spends focused on the future: It seems that its research and theories struggle to keep up with the present, let alone anticipate what may be needed in the coming months and years. The void left by the lack of present- and future-oriented research is then filled by the fads that falsely offer panacea solutions and lead to the poor reputation
of HRD in delivering real outcome benefits. Despite these fads, and somewhat paradoxically, HRD practice seems to be ahead of research, and the latter has yet to find a way of catching up and overtaking. Yet practice desperately needs to benefit from research and theories that apply to leading edge issues.

To pick just one of the many examples that could illustrate this point: technology (Brandenburg & Ellinger, 2003 [this issue]). As organizations make major investments in e-learning, decisions are made based on perceived good practice—essentially, what competitors are (or may be) doing. Where are the models and theories that aid practitioners in making decisions about how to invest their training dollar in e-learning? The challenge to HRD researchers is to anticipate what research is needed and how it can contribute to HRD practice in 1, 2, or 3 years’ time. Likewise, HRD academic programs must continuously redesign curricula to ensure that HRD graduates leave with the most current knowledge and skills as well as a commitment to lifelong learning. The capacity of the HRD profession to be consistently “ahead of the game” will elevate the status of HRD as a key strategic investment in the knowledge economy.

It is just as easy to be critical of HRD practitioners for failing to focus on the future. By being centered on the past or present, many practitioners are running learning activities that are out-of-date relative to new business strategies and new knowledge about learning, and the same practitioners are often late to the table when it comes to discussions on the potential learning implications of likely business decisions. The challenge to HRD practitioners is to focus on the future direction of their organizations, to operate as partners within the business to achieve those visions, to pay attention to emerging learning technologies and cutting-edge research, and to be strategically proactive rather than reactive.

**Challenge 4: Focusing on Problems and Outcomes**

This journal issue is packed with real problems: how to work ethically in a global environment (Russ-Eft & Hatcher, 2003), how to broaden HRD’s perspectives beyond shareholders (May, Sherlock, & Mabry, 2003), how to apply technological solutions to the need for just-in-time operations (Brandenburg & Ellinger, 2003), and how to work with education to provide a more systemic approach to human resource development (Packer & Sharrar, 2003). These problems cry for solutions. Yet the field of HRD appears to get lost in the processes rather than focusing on the desired outcomes. A glance through published research shows a wide variety of research agendas in HRD, but how many of them are focused on solving real problems that matter to stakeholders outside of HRD?
One perspective is that HRD is too inward looking: It studies issues around its purpose, techniques for design and delivery, methods of evaluation—all of which address internal HRD process issues. Where is the work that takes outcome problems and works backward to consider the role of HRD in delivering the solutions? Globalization offers just one example: If the problem is how to best manage the balance between economic advancement and cultural protection, where is the dialogue within HRD that considers the processes needed to achieve this goal?

By focusing on outcome-level problems, and determining the HRD contribution to the solution, HRD is forced to think systemically and move to an outward focus. HRD authors need to cease writing for the converted and seek a significant contribution in the world of those who are “yet to be converted” and those who could be labeled “unaware that HRD could have any role in finding the solution to their problems.” The challenge to practitioners is to move beyond a silo mentality in which solutions can only be found within HRD and to embrace a perspective that organizational problems are systemic and require systemic solutions. This requires that HRD practitioners work in problem-focused, solution-driven, multidiscipline teams within organizations. The challenge to HRD researchers and HRD practitioners alike: Be more externally focused on the outcome-level problem.

**Challenge 5: Achieving Status as a Profession**

HRD is a relatively young field, at least when compared to the management sciences or, to go further back, to the other science professions. Yet few outside of HRD may consider HRD to be a profession. When compared to Horn’s (1978) characteristics of a profession, HRD as a unified field lacks a commitment to articulated standards, lacks a requirement that those in HRD have attained at least minimum educational standards in the theories and practices of HRD; and many HRD professionals rarely exercise independent and self-directed judgment. Of course, HRD has made some progress in recent years—there are professional bodies and there are some ethical codes in existence. However, there is little evidence that these efforts have had an impact on the key factor of professionalization: the degree to which HRD is perceived as a legitimate profession by others.

HRD faces a major challenge. As long as HRD is seen as fad driven and reactive and HRD jobs are filled by those who lack a sound understanding of core HRD theory and practice, HRD will be viewed as secondary to other professions in organizations. Although it will mean some pain, perhaps in the loss of certain people from the field, HRD as a profession needs to take specific steps to increase its credibility within organizations and its recognition as a discrete field of research and practice.
Efforts to build professional recognition will require that HRD construct a sound theory base, a sound education for HRD professionals with accompanying certification and continuing professional development, and ethical standards that are understood and applied by professionals and overseen by professional bodies. More important, as we promote awareness and recognition of HRD as a profession we must keep our focus on values, ethics, the quality of practice, and a set of competencies through which both research and practice can be undertaken and avoid investing energy in the building of bureaucratic processes of credentialing and standardization.

Conclusions

HRD is a relatively young field; and there are significant challenges to its future. Failing to acknowledge these challenges will increasingly marginalize HRD within organizations. The tasks seen as central to the HRD profession will be taken on by others who work in professions more focused on delivering and measuring outcomes, thinking and working systemically, with a sounder theoretical base, with clear standards and ethical codes, with stronger professional bodies, and with competent practitioners. HRD will be left on the sideline: a gradually shrinking number of people who write for themselves, focus on internal process issues, and react ineffectively to demands long after they have been formulated.

The issues we have raised challenge HRD to become a more accountable and integrated part of organizational life and to become more concerned with the short-term and long-term well-being of a global society than with internal HRD definitional and turf issues. All those with a stake in the future of HRD are invited to join together to grapple with the critical challenges that face our field, to engage in deep meaningful dialogue about the challenges, and to construct workable, effective, and immediate approaches to addressing the challenges to secure the future of HRD.

References


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