FUTURE CHALLENGES FOR HUMAN RESOURCE DEVELOPMENT

PROFESSIONALS IN EUROPEAN LEARNING-ORIENTED ORGANISATIONS

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ABSTRACT

Within the scope of the TSER-project (1998-2000) which aimed to examine new HRD initiatives in learning-oriented organisations throughout Europe, this paper presents the general findings and some country specific differences for Belgium. The study aimed to answer the following questions: How do HRD departments in learning-oriented organisations envision their new role in stimulating and supporting employees to learn continuously? What strategies do HRD departments adopt to realise their envisioned role? What inhibiting factors do they encounter when trying to realise their new role? A survey held among a group of 165 companies, 39 of which are located in Belgium, made clear that the Belgian HRD professionals do not position themselves on the first place as strategic partners in realising the business. Also the results concerning the strategies do not disclose a picture of highly innovative HRD practices. However, the professionals indicate that strategies to support the business and to stimulate learning and knowledge sharing will become increasingly important strategies for the future. The factors that appear to hinder the change process most strongly, are a lack of time on behalf of the employees and managers, a lack of clarity on HRD's role, insufficient learning culture and low flexibility of the organisational structure.

INTRODUCTION

Lifelong learning has become, and will remain, an important topic for Europe, as the continent develops into a "learning society" (Gass, 1996; Brandsma, 1997). Work organisations are becoming important partners in this learning society, as they provide more and more opportunities for continuous learning to their employees with the objective to optimise organisational learning as a whole (Pawlowski and Bäumer, 1996). This new focus on employee learning changes the role of human resource development (HRD) departments.

Despite the growing number of publications on the role of Human Resource Development in organisational learning many uncertainties remain. Especially, the question of how to bring their new role as a learning consultant into practice remains unanswered. There is little "recipe" literature, and there are only very few instruments to help HRD officers in this regard. Meanwhile, many interesting initiatives are being undertaken by HRD practitioners throughout Europe in facilitating employee learning on a continuous basis and thus supporting the strategic learning processes of the organisation (Tjepkema, ter Horst, Mulder and Scheerens,. 2000).

The European project "The role of HRD in creating opportunities for lifelong learning: concepts and practices in seven European countries" aimed to examine these HRD initiatives, with two main objectives. Because perspectives of the USA and Japan have traditionally dominated the literature concerning lifelong learning, the first objective was to clarify the specific European outlook on the role of HRD in learning-oriented organisations and to contribute to the discussion on a "European model of lifelong learning". The second objective was to contribute to the further professionalism of HRD in Europe.

Within the scope of the larger Targeted Socio-Economic Research (TSER) project, this paper gives an account of the survey (cf. Methods) presenting the general European findings and confronting this European outlook with the Belgian findings.

Organisational Learning in a Learning-Oriented Organisation

As a result of the ever-increasing rate of technological change, induced by developments such as globalisation and the current "explosion of knowledge", the organisational learning capabilities are pinpointed as the key strategic factors for organisations in the 1990s (Nonaka, 1991).

Argyris and Schön (1978) suggested that organisational learning is a process in which members of an organisation detect error and correct it by restructuring organisational theory of action, embedding the results of their inquiry in organisational maps and images.

For learning on an organisational level, organisations depend on the learning of their employees, since they embody the capacity to acquire or create new knowledge for the organisation, disseminate this knowledge to others within the organisation and apply the new knowledge within the organisation (Dixon, 1994). Organisations deliberately set out to create learning structures for employees, believing that they need "learning individuals" to realise "organisational learning". However, employee learning in itself is not enough to ensure learning at an organisational level. Adequate communication (to transfer to other levels) and a certain amount of empowerment of employees within the operational core (to make improvements in the workplace) are also important in this respect (Senge, 1990; Swieringa & Wierdsma, 1992).

Considering the above, a learning organisation can be described as an organisation which responds to and anticipates changes in its environment by learning on a strategic level. Moreover, it deliberately aims at improving its ability to learn, making use of the learning of all employees. Within this learning process, employee learning is enhanced at all hierarchical levels (Argyris & Schön, 1978). A learning organisation accepts both the environmental turbulence and the fact that it cannot predict which changes will occur (Pedler, Boydell, & Burgoyne, 1991). This description does not present a clear picture of such a company. The concept is more adequately described as a metaphor or an ideal type (Leys, Wijgaerts, & Hancké, 1992), it is a way of looking at organisations wherein the process of organisational learning is the centre of attention.

Organisations that focus on creating opportunities for employee learning, with the long-term goal of becoming a learning organisation, can be labelled "learning-oriented organisations". Leys *et al.* (1992) describe them as organisations which create (on-the-job as well as off-the-job) facilities for employee learning. Moreover, these organisations stimulate employees not only to attain new knowledge and skills, but also to acquire skills in the field of learning and problem solving and thus develop their capacity for future learning (Tjepkema & Wognum, 1996). One could say that becoming a learning-oriented organisation is the first stage in the growth process towards a learning organisation.

Considering the definition of a learning-oriented organisation, where the focus is on the strategic answer for environmental turbulence, the first research question relates to the organisational context of learning-oriented organisations. Furthermore, the following three

questions provide a background against which to interpret the findings with regard to the HRD function.

Research question 1: organisational context of learning-oriented organisations
a) What are the companies' main strategies?
b) What are the main change strategies employed to reach this aim?
c) Why do organisations want to increase their potential for organisational learning?

Human Resource Development in Learning-Oriented Organisations

Sambrook and Stewart (1999) describe how the development into learning-oriented organisations has an impact on the relationship between work and learning. Whereas learning used to be primarily equalled to training, it now becomes predominantly associated with learning from experience and self-directed learning, necessary to cope with changing demands in the organisational environment. Similarly, learning is no longer regarded solely as a classroom activity. This changing view of learning has far-reaching consequences for line managers, who are expected to manage the workplace as a place fit for learning. In addition, this shift has an impact upon employees who are now expected to take greater responsibility for their own learning. Finally, it considerably affects the role and tasks of HRD professionals, who are involved in organising learning activities for the organisation.

A new role for the HRD function. The role which is generally contributed to HRD practitioners in the literature is the role of consultant towards line management, who give advice on how to facilitate and stimulate employee learning in the workplace, and on how to link this learning to organisational needs and goals. The word "trainer" is really no longer an adequate label for their function. The new role of HRD practitioners will be that of a strategic learning facilitator, performance consultant or even change agent (Laiken, 1993; Marsick & Watkins, 1993). In general, the field of HRD seems to be moving from a reactive, isolated business function to a more strategic factor (Barham & Rassan, 1989; De Vos & Buyens, 2000; Buyens, Van Schelstraete, De Vos, & Vandenbossche, 1997).

More specifically, the vision of HRD departments in learning-oriented organisations with regard to their own role can be characterised by three basic principles. These principles are mentioned in the literature, as well as by HRD departments that are working on the development towards a learning organisation (Tjepkema & Wognum, 1995).

Perhaps the most distinguishing principle of HRD departments in learning-oriented organisations is the broadened view of their own work field. It's not limited to training, but stretched to facilitating and supporting learning processes within the organisation, with the aim to contribute to meaningful organisational learning processes. As a result, the HRD department not only fosters formal learning, but also strives to enhance informal and even incidental learning. Next to that, the department not only focuses on individual learning, but also aims at facilitating the collective learning of groups and organisational learning (Stewart, 1996).

The second working principle is that "learning" is a shared responsibility of management, employees and the HRD department. In this respect, the HRD department considers its own role as primarily supportive (e.g. the role of consultant). This implies a shift away from the idea that training is primarily the responsibility of the training department.

Third, the processes of learning and working are considered to be very much intertwined. Learning is being regarded as a normal part of everyday work and working is seen as a rich source for learning (McGill & Slocum, 1994). On-the-job learning is stimulated as much as possible. Therefore, a considerable amount of training takes place on-the-job. Off-the-job training activities will remain important, but they are no longer the dominant way to organise the learning processes. They fulfil a supportive role with regard to the learning and training which takes place on the job.

Based on the three principles mentioned above, we formulated a second research question concerning the way in which HRD departments envision their own role in stimulating and supporting employees to learn continuously:

Research question 2: Vision of the HRD function

How do HRD departments in learning-oriented organisations throughout Europe envision their own role in stimulating and supporting employees to learn continuously, as a part of everyday work (with the intent to contribute to organisational learning, and thus enhancing organisational competitiveness)?

Strategies adopted by HRD professionals. The joint responsibility for HRD brings some new tasks for HRD professionals (De Vos and Buyens, 2000; De Vos and Buyens, 1999; Buyens *et al.*, 1997). The two most typical tasks for HRD professionals in learning-oriented companies seem to be: consulting non-HRD professionals on HRD specific matters, and quality control with regard to training activities carried out by line management and employees (Tjepkema & Wognum, 1995; Buyens & Vanhoven, 2000).

Beside these new tasks, a change of focus is occurring in the way in which HRD professionals carry out their more traditional roles (e.g. the role of trainer) because of changes in the nature of training programmes. The focus is on informal learning. This implies that training activities are no longer HRD's main product. Moreover, the outlook of HRD interventions changes. The trainee will take a more active role towards his or her own learning and training. The trainer explicitly teaches trainees how to learn, and how to shape their own learning activities. Also, training and work are more closely linked. Not only by creating more on-the-job training, but also by using real-life problems in training activities (Tjepkema & Wognum, 1995). Next to these changes in the nature of HRD interventions, attention is being paid to fostering learning on the job in general, by creating a work environment favourable for learning (for example: creating a mentor system, job rotation, organising meetings between employees with similar expertise). The most important condition for learning in the workplace, a stimulating work environment, remains mainly a responsibility of line management. HRD professionals can provide advice and assistance to line management in this respect.

Following from the second research question on the new role of HRD professionals in learning-oriented organisations, research question 3 concerns the strategies adopted to realise their envisioned role. Furthermore, we asked what inhibiting factors HRD departments encounter when trying to realise their new role.

Research question 3: Strategies
What strategies do HRD departments adopt to realise their envisioned role?

Research question 4: Influencing factors
What inhibiting factors do HRD departments encounter when trying to realise their new role?

METHODS

In order to answer the above stated research questions, a combination of qualitative and quantitative research methods was used. The research project was part of the larger TSER programme, which is a research programme organised and sponsored by the European Union to facilitate research on current social and economic issues of great relevance to Europe. Lifelong learning is one of the themes studied within the framework of the TSER programme. This research project on lifelong learning covered two years (1998-2000).

The research project team consisted of partners from seven European countries (Belgium, Finland, France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom), plus a member of the European Consortium for the Learning Organisation (ECLO). The same procedure was followed in each of the participating countries.

Procedure

In the first phase of the project, qualitative case studies were conducted. In each of the participating countries four companies were visited and interviews were held with HRD professionals, (line-) managers and employees. The aim was to gain an in-depth understanding of the concepts of the HRD departments, the strategies they adopt to bring these into practice and the facilitative factors as well as the difficulties they encounter during this implementation process.

In a second phase of the study, a lager group of companies were surveyed, in order to test the findings of the qualitative research. The sample consisted of 165 European companies, of which 39 are located in Belgium.

The main purpose of the survey was to generalise the findings from the case study research and to establish the degree to which HRD departments in other learning-oriented organisations throughout Europe:

- hold the same (or comparable) viewpoints with regard to their role in the organisation as those found in the 28 case study organisations;
- adopt similar strategies to bring these viewpoints into practice; and
- point out the same (or similar) conducive factors as the HRD departments in the case study organisations, and encounter the same (or similar) difficulties in realising their new role.

Measures

Based on the literature review and a thorough analysis of the results of the case studies, a questionnaire was constructed. A first pilot version was discussed with the research project team and filled out by 26 corporate members of ECLO. Based on this feedback, the questionnaire was optimised to a final version.

The questionnaire consisted of both closed and open questions on the concepts and practices of HRD departments in learning-oriented organisations. Besides some descriptive questions on the organisation, HRD function and respondents' demographic characteristics, the questions covered the same themes as those that were the focus of the case studies:

- the organisational context (research question 1),
- the vision of HRD function on own role (research question 2),
- strategies to realise envisioned role (research question 3) and
- conducive and inhibiting factors (research question 4).

Many questions were not only related to the current state but also to the expected evolution of this situation. Respondents were asked to indicate both current and expected future importance on a five-point scale. For the current importance of each aspect, the scale ran from 1 (very unimportant) to 5 (very important). For the estimated future development, the scale ran from 1 (much less important) to 5 (much more important). Thus, when reading the tables, it is important to bear in mind that the mean scores displayed in the two columns (current and future importance) cannot be compared as such. For example, a 4 for current importance and a 5 for future importance does not mean that the importance is expected increase with 1 point. Instead, it means respondents consider the item currently as "important", and expect it to become "much more important".

Sample

The respondent population of the survey consisted of HRD professionals in large (500 employees or more) organisations. In order to determine whether an organisation could participate in the study, we used three criteria:

- Based on the definition of Tjepkema and Wognum (1996), there was reason to assume the company can be regarded a learning-oriented organisation. These authors defined learning organisations as organisations which create (on-the-job as well as off-the-job) facilities for employee learning, and stimulate employees not only to attain new knowledge and skills in the field of learning and problem solving and thus develop their capacity for future learning.
- The company has an HRD function.
- The company has at least 500 employees.

The primary respondents were those with a strategic, managerial role in the HRD function. Since they have a helicopter view of the HRD function, they were able to answer all the questions. In cases of very large organisations, the HRD function on the division level, or a large establishment was selected, not the HRD function on the corporate level.

RESULTS

The underlying paper reflects only the second part of the global research project. Moreover, the following sections provide an overview and single out the most important characteristics specific for learning-oriented organisations in Belgium. Generally speaking, the Belgian findings are highly similar to the overall picture. Nevertheless, it is remarkable that the Belgian scores are the lowest on average. This is especially the case for the variables that describe the current situation. For the future, still half of the scores are scored below average. This may be caused by cultural factors, in the sense that Belgian respondents tend to answer these kinds of questions modestly.

The text focuses successively on the main organisational strategies of the survey companies, the envisioned role of the HRD departments, the strategies to realise this envisioned role and factors influencing this process.

Organisational Context

In order to provide a background against which to interpret the findings with regard to the HRD function, we first asked three questions concerning the organisational context: What are the companies' main strategies? What are the main change strategies to reach this aim? and Why do organisations want to increase their potential for organisational learning?.

With regard to the companies main strategies (see Table I), the Belgian picture is very similar to that of the European outlook. Dealing with strong competitive markets caused by globalisation and fast-changing technologies, improving client focus is mentioned as an issue of major importance. Other key strategic issues are improving and innovating products, processes and services, quality improvements and optimising the internal organisation.

Those strategies that are most important now are also considered to increase most strongly in the future. Whereas those strategy elements that are not so central to the business now are also expected to become more relevant, but to a lesser degree.

With regard to the specific human resource strategies, it appears that the increased attention for development of employees is a response to those strategic challenges affecting the core business and in that sense, they are of secondary importance.

Insert Table 1 about here

Also the results about the change initiatives (see Table II) in Belgian companies are in line with the European results. In order to meet their new strategic challenges, the Belgian companies employ a rich variety of change strategies. Creating a client-oriented culture, attention to communication and information sharing and changes in organisational structures appears to be the most important change initiative. But initiatives regarding increased employee responsibilities, attention to management development and creating a learning culture are also encountered. The involvement of HRD in these change initiatives is highest in the areas which are directly associated with learning and development, such as management development, communication and information sharing, improvement of learning culture and changes in HRD strategies. This means that HRD's role as a strategic partner is not considered to be very well established. It appears that most HRD professionals narrow their own role and do not position themselves as strategic partners in realising business objectives, such as creating a client oriented culture.

Insert Table 2 about here

Concerning the motives (see Table III) for becoming a learning organisation, the Belgian organisations emphasise the personnel-related forces more strongly. For example, a need for innovation and economic factors play a less important role compared to the desire to increase employee commitment and improving quality of work. This is in contrast with the overall picture where both business-related and personnel-related motives are significant forces driving implementation of learning organisation concepts.

Envisioned Role of the HRD Department

Organisations seek to improve learning possibilities for employees from a strategic necessity, and start up a wide variety of initiatives to do so. Research question 2 concerns the way in which HRD departments in these learning-oriented organisations envision their own role in stimulating and supporting employees to learn continuously.

Objectives. The analysis of the quantitative data indicates that HRD functions have objectives within five areas (see Table IV), namely: supporting the business; supporting (informal) learning; supporting knowledge sharing; development and co-ordination of training; and changing HRD practices. All are rather important, some more than others, but differences are not big enough to reflect a real rank order of objectives. Of course, changing HRD practices is an intermediary objective, but some HRD functions strive for a reorganisation of HRD, in order to fulfil their tasks.

In line with the general picture of the European outlook the Belgian companies expect that, even though current attention for supporting informal learning (increasing learning abilities, stimulating the use of informal learning opportunities and implementing a learning culture) is not as great as for other objectives, these objectives will increase most in importance in the future. From the data we can also conclude that the Belgian respondents, in contrast with the overall picture, do not position themselves first as strategic partners in realising business. This confirms the results concerning HRD's involvement in important organisational change initiatives. This conclusion is compatible to the strong emphasis on the more traditional objective of development and co-ordination of training, which is also the case for the other participant countries. Nevertheless, this is the only objective that won't become more relevant in the future.

Division of HRD tasks. As shown in Table V, the role of HRD professionals is predominantly one of designing and realising HRD processes, and to a lesser degree providing operational support for line-managed learning processes. We can conclude that HRD professionals fulfil a mix of "traditional" and "new" HRD tasks. They fulfil consulting tasks (and pragmatic support) but traditional tasks in the design and realisation of training also remain important.

Insert Table 5 about here

With regard to the division of HRD tasks, Table VI states clearly that HRD professionals, in Belgium as well as in the other participating countries, still carry the biggest share of responsibility for HRD. Managers are also an important category, whereas employees and external training providers are seen as less involved. Overall, the respondents seem to find it desirable for the future that HRD professionals carry a little less responsibility. In front of that, managers and employees are expected to play a more active role in supporting employee learning. In Belgium, the respondents only desire a stronger involvement of the employees towards their own development. They do not wish to assign a bigger responsibility to the managers. As a consequence, the difference in commitment between managers and HRD professionals stays rather equal.

Insert Table 6 about here

Strategies adopted to realise Envisioned Role

Concerning the third research question, the case studies yielded a wide range of strategies employed by HRD professionals to realise their envisioned role, without a clear indication of the relative weight of each of these strategies (Tjepkema *et al.,*2000; Van Schelstraete *et al.,*2000). The survey attempted to establish somewhat of a ranking order. This proved difficult, since the respondents rated nearly all strategies as "relevant" or "important", as shown in Table VII.

However, most noticeable when overlooking the general picture and the specific situation in Belgium is the importance still attached to formal training programmes. Also in Belgium, training-related strategies still fulfil a significant role. Among the least important strategies are instruments and initiatives (improvement of learner-oriented methods, self-directed learning programmes and open learning centre) to increase employee responsibility for learning.

As such, results do not paint a picture of very innovative HRD practices, dominated by new methods such as knowledge management networks and stimulating learning climate in the workplace. For one part this is because HRD objectives are not that far-stretched. For another part, these outcomes might indicate that HRD practices to some extent fall behind HRD vision. HRD professionals do want to broaden their horizon by supporting more informal modes of learning and by co-operating with managers and employees. Although in practice, their work is still dominated by the more traditional, training-related tasks.

For the future, the respondents expect all strategies to become more important. There is no immediate difference between strategies in the field of training and in other areas.

Insert Table 7 about here

Influencing Factors

Though HRD objectives indicate that HRD professionals are not only interested in providing training, but also seek to support other forms of learning, HRD practices reveal that training is still very dominant. As a result, training-related tasks are still very important in their total task load, next to newer tasks such as consulting line management and employees. And though HRD professionals feel it is important to share responsibility for HRD with line management and employees, they still carry most of the responsibility themselves. For these reasons, it was relevant to investigate whether there are specific reasons for this situation (see research question 4). Based on the case study results, an overview of the most important influencing factors was put to the survey respondents. They were asked to indicate whether these factors were present in their companies, on a scale from 1-insufficient/low/negative- to 5 – sufficient/high/positive-, and how their presence or absence influenced the attainment of HRD objectives, also on a scale from 1 –very negative to 5 – very positive.

The European companies in general report a slight lack of clarity on HRD's role, some lack of time for learning on the part of employees and some lack of time for managers for performing HRD tasks (see Table VIII). Though Belgian HRD professionals indicate that there is a high motivation for learning and enough money/time for HRD initiatives in their organisations, certain specific influences are keeping HRD professionals from changing their practices.

The factors which appear to hinder the change process most strongly are: insufficient time for managers to perform HRD tasks, lack of clarity on HRD's role and goals, insufficient learning culture, low flexibility of organisational structure and insufficient time for learning on part of the employees.

Insert Table 8 about here

CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION

One of the most distinguishing features of a "learning organisation" is that it operates in an environment marked by a high rate of change. A learning organisation accepts both this environmental turbulence and the fact that it cannot predict which changes will occur (Pedler *et al.*, 1991). Concerning the organisational context, the companies involved in the study can be labelled as learning-oriented organisations. The key *strategic issues*, such as client focus and improving and innovating products, have in common that they all focus on improving flexibility in order to respond quickly to the fast changing world. In this respect we can speak of organisational learning.

The increased attention paid to development of employees is a response to these strategic challenges affecting the core business. However, as the Belgian empirical findings made clear, personnel-related *motives* for becoming a learning organisation are emphasised. Important to consider is that the business-related motives are probably paramount, whereas personnel-related motives are a result of the business challenges. In other words, for learning on an organisational level, organisations depend on the learning of their employees (Dixon, 1994). Moreover, the survey was of HRD professionals, who are in a people-oriented line of work, and therefore might have biased views on the importance attached to these kinds of motives.

In order to stimulate their development towards a learning organisation, the organisations employ a rich variety of *change strategies*, which do not only focus on creating facilities for employee learning. Within the framework of this study, it is important to notice that HRD's role as a strategic partner is not considered to be very well established. Especially in Belgium, the involvement of HRD professionals in the change initiatives is mainly associated with training and development.

Although the Belgian HRD professionals fulfil a mix of consulting and traditional tasks, there is no clear shift from "trainer" to "consultant", as mentioned in the literature (Marsick & Watkins, 1993). The objectives of development and co-ordination of training still mark the *role* of the Belgian HRD professionals. And though HRD professionals feel it is important to share responsibility with line management and employees, they still carry most of the responsibility themselves.

Also the *HRD practices* are not very innovative. New methods, in which the trainee takes a more active role towards his own learning and training or in which working and learning are more closely linked, do not hold an important position. Nevertheless, the respondents argue that in the future the focus will be on informal learning and that they desire greater involvement of the employees. They expect a change of focus in the way in which they carry out their traditional role (Tjepkema & Wognum, 1995).

Concerning the *influencing factors*, it appears that HRD professionals find it difficult to clearly communicate their new role, objectives and to bring these into being. One of the challenges encountered is the question of how to actively involve line management and employees in learning and HRD tasks. Possible reasons for a lack of time on behalf of the managers is that the managers are still judged only on their operational results, not on achievements with regard to employee development, and a lack of skills on the part of the managers to fulfil HRD tasks. Explanations for the experienced lack of time for learning on the part of employees are that they still associate learning very strongly with classroom training (Simons, 1999). They do not value workplace learning as much. It might also be that they are not yet used to their new role as "active learner", and/or may feel not skilled enough to take the initiative for their own learning process. Considering the above it's important that the HRD professionals articulate their own role in the learning process and make a distinction between their role and the role of employees and managers.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the conclusions, some preliminary recommendations can be made with regard to the role of managers, the strategic challenges for HRD professionals, the skills of HRD professionals, the employee motivation for learning, the role of organisations and government and future research.

Role of Managers

First of all, it's necessary to open up the debate on what exactly is expected of managers with regard to HRD, and what remains/becomes the role of HRD professionals. Some seem to expect the HRD function to vanish, as learning issues are more and more integrated with general management, while others appear to see a different role for HRD professionals.

The delegation of HRD responsibilities carries problems and risks (Horwitz, 1999), as line managers are not specialists in people development and ownership of HRD responsibility may not be part of their performance objectives. In the short term, it is necessary to find strategies to involve managers in HRD, by changing their views on learning and increasing their motivation to support learning. HRD professionals could realise this attitude change by actively supporting managers in their new tasks or even by optimising professionalism in the field of HRD. In the long run, it would be interesting to consider incorporating HRD skills in all management programmes, if HRD is truly to become an integrated part of business. The way in which management supports their staff in learning could also become an issue in performance appraisals and management career planning.

Strategic Challenges for HRD Professionals

Human assets are becoming the most important wealth of an organisation if they are adequately nurtured and if their potential is efficiently developed. Therefore, HRD functions should be more precisely defined and recognised by top management as a major part of the global development strategy of the company. Also HRD functions themselves has to increase their strategic orientation in order to get involved in strategic processes. Furthermore, the HRD role and strategies must be reconsidered in the future from a learning perspective instead of the

classical training perspective. Such a change is linked to the knowledge and a correct understanding of the very concept of the learning organisation.

HRD Professionals Skills

Instead of trainers, HRD professionals become now consultants, who also have to manage the link between their activities and the company strategy. This requires a totally different set of skills, since it is more a role "behind the scenes" instead of "on stage". It would be worthwhile to consider supporting professionalism of HRD professionals on a more broad scale. Professional associations from different European countries could create lively and inspiring networks of HRD professionals where they can exchange ideas and commonly try to solve difficult challenges. These platforms may also serve to create a common terminology. It has become apparent that many practitioners do not adopt the term HRD and do not speak of their organisations as being learning-oriented. The issue of language and terminology is an important one, and meanings and definitions must be further explained and shared if academics and practitioners learn from each other and together.

Employee Motivation for Learning

Next to the challenges for line managers and HRD professionals it seems very crucial that employees are motivated to learn. A lack of motivation imposes a serious inhibiting factor to realise the new work practices. An important aspect with regard to motivation is an appreciation of more informal ways of learning and development, and a sense of responsibility for their own learning. It would be worthwhile to explore ways in which this attitude change can be brought about and employees can be motivated for learning on an intrinsic basis (e.g. providing training credits and career guidance). As Chaplin (1993) stated: "Companies should be encouraged to have their in-house programmes validated by appropriate awarding bodies. This will ensure that the quality of the programmes is judged against national or European norms. It will give employees completing such programmes recognition of achievements with value and credibility outside the company." And: "Companies should ensure that all learning achievements by their staffs are recognised by publicity, appropriate promotion and reward. " (Chaplin, 1993).

Organisations and Governments

There is also a role for companies and even governments in supporting a shift towards integration of HRD in companies in such a way that it supports processes of lifelong learning. First, it is important that organisations grow to understand how the notion of permanent learning of individuals and teams has important consequences for the strategies and activities implemented, so that all workers can benefit from this. For public administrative bodies, it is important that strong policies are developed and implemented to support the principles of life-long learning. Policy makers could take account of these changing roles in directing their support for vocational education, training and development.

Creating an Infrastructure for Lifelong Learning

In order to create an infrastructure for lifelong learning, co-operation between the different parties is necessary. In order to support learning in the workplace, companies could seek co-operation with higher institutions for vocational education and with universities. If learning initiatives in Europe are to meet the needs of industry, leaders of industry must ensure that their views are taken into account in the design of such initiatives. It is essential therefore that industrialists participate fully in professional, national and European initiatives, to foster and take forward lifelong learning (Chaplin, 1993). Here too, national and European associations of HRD professionals could play an active role in such discussions, as spokespersons of industry.

Future Research

An important theme for future research is the benefit and added value of HRD on the organisational level. This could help the development of HRD as a strategic factor. Furthermore, it would be interesting to study the vision of employees and managers on the issues studied. Empirical evidence on these issues could foster the discussion on HRD tasks for line managers and HRD professionals. It would be interesting to elaborate the country specific differences. Finally, it would be informative to link the study to the national contexts, incentives for organisations and individuals to invest in HRD activities, policy measures taken by the national administration, law enactment in certain fields and the developments in educational systems. This may show further intra-European diversity than has been found in

this study. But above all it may explain the diversity to a large extent, and this may lead to guidelines for European policy efforts to improve conditions for HRD in European countries.

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TABLE 1

Organisational strategies (mean scores)

	Current importance		Future importance	
General strategies	**Belgium**	**Overall**	**Belgium**	**Overall**
Increasing client focus	4.3	4.5	4.5	4.4
Innovation products and services	3.6	4.2	4.3	4.2
Improvements products and services	3.8	4.2	4.2	4.2
Quality advantages	3.9	4.2	4.2	4.1
Optimising the internal organisation	3.8	4.0	4.3	4.2
Improving flexibility	3.6	3.9	4.1	4.1
All strategic issues are aimed at increasing competitiveness	3.3	3.9	3.9	4.0
Cost advantages	3.7	3.9	3.8	4.1
Concentration on core competencies	3.6	3.8	4.2	4.1
Strategic alliance and networking	3.4	3.7	4.1	4.0
Internationalisation	3.2	3.6	3.6	3.8
Mergers and acquisition	2.9	3.1	3.2	3.4
Outsourcing of processes	3.0	3.1	3.6	3.4
Diversification	2.9	2.8	3.3	3.3
Human resource strategies				
Improving knowledge sharing	3.4	3.8	4.4	4.3
Improving employee learning	3.4	3.8	4.3	4.2
Improving learning culture	3.4	3.7	4.3	4.2
Implementing competence management	3.2	3.6	4.2	4.2

TABLE 2

Change processes and involvement of HRD (mean scores)

Change initiatives	Current importance		Involvement of HRD	
	Belgium	Overall	Belgium	Overall
Creating/improving client oriented culture	4.0	4.2	3.2	3.5
Attention to management development	3.5	4.0	3.8	4.3
Attention to communication and information sharing	4.0	4.0	3.8	3.8
Changes in organisational structure	4.0	3.9	3.4	3.5
Improvement of learning culture	3.4	3.8	3.8	4.0
Process orientation	3.3	3.8	2.7	3.2
Increased employee responsibilities	3.6	3.8	3.2	3.4
Translating central strategies in operational policies on a lower level	3.3	3.7	2.9	3.3
Changes in HRD strategies	3.3	3.7	3.7	4.1
Team building	3.3	3.6	3.3	3.5
Sharing a mission statement	3.3	3.6	3.0	3.2
Improvement of learning abilities	3.2	3.6	3.4	3.9
Changes in HRD organisations	3.1	3.4	3.5	3.9

TABLE 3

Reasons for becoming a learning organisation (mean scores)

Reasons for becoming a learning organisation	Importance	
	Belgium	**Overall**
Need for innovation	3.7	4.1
Increasing employee commitment	4.3	4.1
Improving quality of work	4.0	4.0
Increasing possibilities for personal development	3.8	4.0
Economic factors (e.g. cost reduction, competitiveness)	3.5	3.9
Improving employee retention	3.5	3.5
Improving quality of life of employees	3.4	3.4

TABLE 4

Objectives HRD functions (mean scores)

Objectives	Current importance		More/less attention in future	
	Belgium	Overall	Belgium	Overall
Support current strategic objectives in general	3.4	3.9	3.8	3.9
Support current organisational change programmes	3.1	3.8	3.8	3.8
Support management development	3.4	3.8	4.0	4.1
Promoting employee development	3.5	3.8	3.9	4.0
Increasing learning abilities employees/managers	3.1	3.5	4.1	4.0
Stimulating use of informal learning opportunities	3.0	3.5	4.0	4.0
Implementing a learning culture	2.9	3.4	4.1	4.0
Supporting communication/knowledge sharing	3.4	3.7	4.1	4.1
Development and co-ordination of training	3.8	3.9	3.8	3.7
Efficiency of HRD activities	3.0	3.6	3.9	3.9
Increasing utilisation of HRD services within the organisation	2.9	3.6	3.8	3.8
(Further) professionalism of HRD practitioners	3.3	3.6	4.0	4.0
Changing HRD practices	3.0	3.5	3.9	4.0
Concentration on core competencies of the HRD function	3.0	3.3	3.8	3.6

TABLE 5

Roles of HRD (mean scores)

Role	Current situation		Expected evolution	
	Belgium	**Overall**	**Belgium**	**Overall**
Design and realisation of HRD processes	3.5	3.9	3.7	3.6
Operational support for line-managed learning processes	2.9	3.5	4.1	3.9
Proactive development and implementation of innovative HRD concepts	2.8	3.3	4.0	3.9
Management of relationships	2.8	3.3	3.9	3.9
Management of the HRD function	2.5	3.2	4.2	4.0
Support for defining and implementing of organisational strategies	2.5	3.1	4.0	4.1
Realisation of organisational change projects	2.6	3.1	4.0	4.0

TABLE 6

Parties involved in HRD

Parties involved	Current situation		Desired situation	
	Belgium	**Overall**	**Belgium**	**Overall**
HRD professionals	40%	43%	36%	34%
Managers	28%	28%	28%	33%
Employees	18%	17%	22%	23%
External training providers	14%	17%	14%	14%
Total	100%	105%	100%	104%

TABLE 7

HRD strategies (mean scores) *

HRD strategies, techniques, instruments	Frequency of use in current situation		Future use	
	Belgium	Overall	Belgium	Overall
Implementing teamwork	3.0	3.5	3.8	3.9
Using competence management	2.3	2.9	4.1	4.1
Culture change programmes	2.2	2.8	3.6	3.9
Stimulating workplace learning	3.3	3.4	4.0	4.1
Personal development plans	2.7	3.3	3.9	3.9
Coaching	3.0	3.2	4.1	4.1
Using intranet	2.9	3.1	4.0	4.1
Benchmarking	2.3	3.0	3.5	3.8
Mentoring	2.5	2.8	3.8	3.9
Improvement of learner oriented learning methods	2.1	2.7	3.6	3.8
Self-directed learning programmes	1.9	2.5	3.5	3.7
Open learning centre	1.7	2.3	3.4	3.5
Knowledge exchange networks	2.4	3.0	3.8	4.0
Stimulating knowledge management	2.3	2.9	3.8	4.1
New training courses	3.5	3.8	3.6	3.5
New types of training courses	2.9	3.4	3.8	3.8
Use of modern media for training	2.8	3.2	3.9	4.0
Supporting management in HRD tasks	2.8	3.4	3.8	3.9
Decentralisation of HRD activities	2.4	2.9	3.5	3.4

* Five clusters of strategies could be identified, linked to the five categories of HRD objectives: strategies aimed at supporting the business, stimulating (informal) learning, knowledge sharing, training-related strategies, changing HRD practices.

TABLE 8

Influencing factors and the nature of their influence (mean scores)

Influencing factors	Existent in organisation?		Nature of influence	
	Belgium	Overall	Belgium	Overall
Results of new HRD activities (negative-positive)	3.3	3.5	3.4	3.7
Motivation for learning (low-high)	3.4	3.4	3.3	3.8
Attitude to change (negative-positive)	2.9	3.3	3.1	3.6
Money for HRD activities (insufficient-sufficient)	3.4	3.3	3.3	.4
Motivation for sharing knowledge (low-high)	3.0	3.1	3.2	3.5
Learning culture (insufficient-sufficient)	2.7	3.0	3.1	3.5
Clarity on HRD's goals (low-high)	2.6	3.0	2.7	3.4
Time for HRD professionals (insufficient-sufficient)	3.3	3.0	2.9	3.3
Flexibility of organisational culture (low-high)	2.7	3.0	2.9	3.3
Clarity on HRD's role (low-high)	2.4	2.9	2.6	3.4
Time for learning on part of employees (insufficient-sufficient)	2.8	2.8	3.1	3.3
Time for managers for performing HRD tasks (insufficient-sufficient)	2.2	2.5	2.5	3.0