

Will Human Resource Development Survive?

We, the authors, experience human resource development (HRD) as a paradox. This is a time when HRD appears to be at its strongest in terms of publications and research outputs and when the environment appears right for HRD to demonstrate clear value-added to key stakeholders. However, in other ways, HRD appears inner directed and without substantial impact: publications seem to preach to the converted; HRD research and, to some degree, practice appear divorced from real-time problems in organizations; HRD professionals see their work being completed by those from other professions; there is limited evidence that HRD has really moved far from the fad-ridden gutters of false short-term training panaceas; and practitioners are still measuring training person-hours rather than the relationship between learning and productivity.

Every year, the members of the ASTD Research-to-Practice Committee are given an opportunity to write an editorial for *HRDQ*. Two years ago, Dilworth (2001) described the committee's work in exploring the future of HRD. Last year, Short, Brandenburg, May, and Bierema (2002) summarized the main trends identified by that work, focusing on the implications for HRD of the increasing pressure for organizations to deliver shareholder value, the trend toward globalization, and the need for just-in-time products, services, and solutions. Since then the work has been extended and prepared for publication in a forthcoming issue of *Advances in Developing Human Resources*.

From this body of work a number of major challenges have emerged. These are macro issues that address the question: What challenges must the HRD profession overcome to ensure the effectiveness and success of the field in the coming years? Here, we set out challenges to provoke thought and action. Our intention is to encourage HRD's multiple stakeholders to join in a spirited discussion on the future of HRD.

Challenge 1: Responding to Multiple Stakeholders

The ongoing critical debate about whether corporations have a responsibility to a wider group of stakeholders beyond their focus on shareholders continues to capture attention (May & Kahnweiler, 2002). HRD practitioners are caught up in the shareholder-stakeholder debate, in part because they are responsible for the learning supply chain that supports organizations. HRD cannot blindly

focus on shareholder value alone if it 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 corporations. As companies proceed from manufacturing to “mentalfacturing,” 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 suggestion that HRD orient itself to multiple stakeholders implies that HRD professionals should promote corporate accountability beyond shareholders to communities and societies (Kaufman & Guerra, 2002). Perhaps HRD professionals will be able to educate the organization on the meaning of social responsibility and its relationship to corporate performance, while demonstrating effective strategies for addressing multiple needs and negotiating various stakeholder interests. No doubt, there is risk in taking a bold position in favor of stakeholder interests, but the risk is greater in doing nothing.

Challenge 2: Measuring HRD Impact and Utility

To establish themselves as key players in the development of organizational strategy, HRD practitioners must demonstrate how what they do correlates with the productivity and welfare of the company (Russ-Eft & Preskill, 2001; Swanson & Holton, 1999). 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 not only lead to greater overall influence of HRD on the organization but will strengthen HRD’s reputation as a legitimate profession. Therefore, over the next decade, linking learning and human process to performance and measuring learning, human process, and the resulting change in performance are crucial challenges to the field. Well-designed studies linking learning to productivity will be critical to these efforts.

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 and 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 (Preskill & Russ-Eft, 2003). Ethical engagement in measurement work will maintain integrity around the complexity of learning and performance processes and will protect against laying shortfalls on the backs of learners and those who facilitate their learning.

Challenge 3: Orienting Toward the Future

We are concerned about how little time HRD spends focused on the future. 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 is filled by the fads, which falsely offer panacea solutions and lead to the poor reputation of HRD in delivering real long-term outcome benefits. To put it another way, HRD contains some products that are “quick-fix, flavor-of-the-month, buzz-worded remnants of a slick sales job” (Leimbach, 1999, p. 1).

Yet practice desperately needs to benefit from research and theories that apply to leading-edge issues. The challenge to HRD researchers is to anticipate what research is needed and how it can contribute to HRD practice in one, two, or three years, and then to make it available in ways that maximize the likelihood that research findings influence practitioner behavior. The ability of our profession to be consistently ahead of the game will elevate the status of HRD as a key investment in the knowledge economy.

It is just as easy to be critical of HRD practitioners for failing to focus on the future. Many 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 be strategically proactive rather than reactive.

Challenge 4: Focusing on Problems and Outcomes of HRD Practice

Organizations are arenas with real problems that cry out for solutions. Yet the field of HRD appears to get lost in exploring its own processes. 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 HRD? Chermack and Lynham (2002) listed the top twenty symposia topics from past conferences of the Academy of Human Resource Development. Included in the list are such internal process issues as core directions in HRD, university HRD programs, and advancing the profession through journals. Absent from the list are the major trends identified by Short, Brandenburg, May, and Bierema (2002): the increasing pressure for organizations to deliver shareholder value, the trend toward globalization, and the need for just-in-time products, services, and solutions.

By focusing on outcome-level problems and determining the HRD contribution to the solution, HRD is forced to think systemically and deliver a major contribution. 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 as being 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 be found only 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.

Challenge 5: Achieving Professional Recognition

HRD is a relatively young field. Few outside HRD consider it a profession. Chalofsky (1998) argued that HRD had yet to reach the level of a mature profession because practice is based on guesswork and not on theories tested by research, practice is based on research and thinking that are at least ten years out of date, and practice is based on what the client wants rather than on what works.

As long as HRD is seen as fad driven and reactive and those who lack a sound understanding of core HRD theory and practice fill HRD jobs, then HRD will be viewed as secondary to other professions in organizations. Although it will mean painful effort, either further professional development of practitioners or the loss of existing people, HRD as a profession needs to take specific steps to increase its credibility in organizations and its recognition as a discrete field of research and practice.

Efforts to build professional recognition will require HRD to construct a sound theory base and apply those theories in practice. As Swanson (2001) stated, "HRD practice does not come close to what we know from sound theory" (p. 309). The efforts will also require a sound education for HRD professionals with accompanying professional recognition 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 competent practitioners. HRD will be left on the sidelines: 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.

We invite all those with a stake in the future of HRD to join together to grapple with the critical challenges that face our field, engage in deep meaningful dialogue about the challenges, and construct workable, effective, and immediate approaches to addressing the challenges to secure the future of HRD. Our goal is to banish complacency and to encourage dialogue. HRD's human resources are impressive; they must now be focused.

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