

New Perspectives for Learning - Briefing Paper 22

Lifelong learning: the role of human resource development within organisations

Context of the Research

Lifelong learning has become, and will remain, an important issue for Europe, as it develops into a “learning society”. Work organisations are becoming important partners in this learning society, as they provide ever more opportunities for continuous learning to their employees, in order to optimise organisational learning. Companies that explicitly encourage and support worker learning, from a strategic perspective, are called ‘learning organisations’.

The new focus on employee learning changes the role of the Human Resource Development (HRD) function. The role of HRD within ‘learning organisations’ is becoming clearer, but many uncertainties remain for HRD professionals, especially with regard to the question of how to bring their new roles into practice. There are only a few instruments to help HRD officers in this regard. Yet, many interesting initiatives are being undertaken by HRD practitioners throughout Europe to support strategic learning processes of the organisation as a whole.

This project has examined these HRD initiatives with the objective of firstly clarifying the specific European outlook on the role that HRD, (in learning oriented organisations) can fulfil in lifelong learning, thus contributing to the discussion on a ‘European model of lifelong learning’. Secondly the project aimed to contribute to the further professionalisation of HRD in Europe, by providing both conceptual perspectives and practical examples.

Case study descriptions were made from HRD functions within 30 large “learning oriented” organisations throughout Belgium, Finland, Germany, Italy, The Netherlands and the United Kingdom. Additionally, a survey was held under a larger group of 165 companies. Based on a literature review comparisons were made with Japanese and US organisations.

Key research questions, guiding data collection, were:

1. How do HRD departments in learning oriented organisations envision their own role in stimulating and supporting employee learning?
2. What strategies do they adopt to realise their envisioned role?

3. What factors inhibit the realisation of this new role? How do HRD practitioners cope with them?
4. What factors facilitate the realisation of HRD's new role?

Key Conclusions

The following key conclusions were reached: -

1. The "learning organisation" is an important metaphor for HRD professionals to assist them in:
 - a) Developing collective intelligence within organisations and organisational forms supporting such a need thus eliminating the holding of knowledge in separate compartments at different levels.
 - b) Understanding the importance of knowledge and in particular tacit knowledge, which has to be recognised and valorised insofar as it is embedded in human resources.
 - c) Moving from training-based development policies towards new policies fostering learning in different ways (support for competencies development, learning networks, learning self-assessment in the communities of practice)
2. Learning oriented organisations do employ a rich bouquet of change initiatives, in which, no one type of change is particularly dominant.
3. The main motivator for wanting to become a learning organisation is the desire to become more client centred by continuous improvement and innovation. However, more people-oriented reasons such as improving the quality of working life seem to play a role as well.
4. The envisioned role of HRD professionals within learning organisations is to: -
 - a) Support the business.
 - b) Support (informal) learning.
 - c) Support knowledge sharing (as a special form of supporting informal learning).
 - d) Develop and coordinate training.
 - e) Change HRD practices.
5. Although HRD professionals consider that this is still their main responsibility, managers and employees are important active partners in supporting learning, and are expected to become more so in the future. Their role is predominantly one of identifying learning needs, stimulating and supporting informal learning, ensuring the continuous learning of themselves and others. HRD professionals will continue to provide support like organising training and supporting informal learning efforts.

6. However, it was found that HRD training-related strategies still fulfil a significant role, with instruments and initiatives to increase employee responsibility for learning, being of least importance.
7. Thus HRD practices to some extent appear to fall behind HRD visions and do not paint a picture of very innovative HRD practices, dominated by new methods such as knowledge management networks and a stimulating learning climate in the workplace. This may be partially because HRD objectives are not that wide-ranging.
8. No specific influencing factors were found to stop HRD professionals from changing their practices more significantly. Although some barriers to change were found: -
 - a) Insufficient time for learning on the part of the employees.
 - b) Insufficient time for performing HRD tasks on the part of the managers.
 - c) Lack of clarity on the role of HRD.
9. The type of organisation does not influence the way in which the organisation envisage the role of HRD; the strategies they employ to implement HRD activities and the factors that facilitate the attainment of the envisioned role of HRD.
10. There is no one single European model for HRD, although there are subtle but meaningful differences as to the philosophies, strategies, and practices on HRD across the countries in the study.
11. Nor, is there any overriding 'Japanese' or 'US' HRD vision as the differences between the companies are huge.
12. Line-managers are increasingly taken a role in the development of human resources due to: -
 - a) The convergence of management of organisational competences (aimed at internal effectiveness and competitive advantages on the market), and the management of individual/communities competencies (based on explicit and tacit knowledge)
 - b) New ways of organising firms.

Key Recommendations

The following recommendations were made: -

1. Managers fulfil a key role in changing HRD practices but it was found that it is sometimes difficult to get them to fulfil this active role, either because of their workload, lack of affinity with HRD tasks or a lack of skills in this field.
2. Therefore 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. In the long run, consideration should be given to incorporating HRD skills in all management training programmes.

3. HRD functions should be more precisely defined and recognised by top management as a major part of the global development strategy of the company and seen as an investment rather than a cost.
4. Professional associations from different European countries should organise events where HRD professionals can reach a common terminology, exchange ideas and collectively try to solve difficult challenges.
5. There is a need to change the view that learning is just a classroom, teacher-based activity.
6. Companies should seek cooperation with (higher) institutions for vocational education and with universities in order to assist in the creation of an infrastructure for lifelong learning.
7. Administrations and governmental agencies should set the example in adopting a clear learning organisation approach and more sophisticated human resources development policies.
8. Since competence development is seen as a key element of implementing the concept of the learning organisation, further research is needed to develop valid and useful competence profiles; better understanding of the facilitating and inhibiting factors in competence assessment and development; and in coping strategies of organisations that try to overcome problems in implementing competence systems.

Further Information

Full title of the project - "The Role of HRD Within Organizations in Creating Opportunities for Life-Long Learning: Concepts and Practices in Seven European Countries" with the final report "Future challenges for HRD professionals in Europe" completed in August 2000.

[Full report](#), [Abstract](#), [Summary](#), [Partner details](#) [Website](#)

A book on this project was published in the Routledge series Studies in Human Resource Development: Tjepkema, S., Stewart, J., Sambrook, S., Mulder, M., Horst, H. ter, and Scheerens, J. (2002) *HRD and learning organisations in Europe*. London: Routledge. ISBN 0-415-27788-4

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