Strategies of HRD professionals in organising learning programmes

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Strategies of HRD Professionals in Organising Learning Programmes: A Qualitative Study among 20 Dutch HRD Professionals

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Abstract

This study aims to explore how current HRD strategies are put into practice and to what extent they are in line with theoretical ideas espoused in HRD literature. Two research questions are framed within the theoretical framework of learning-network theory. Firstly, what strategies do HRD practitioners employ to organise learning programmes? Secondly, what problems and barriers do HRD practitioners encounter in organisational reality? The study is based on data collected from twenty Dutch HRD practitioners using a semi-structured interview questionnaire. A qualitative analysis was conducted on interview summaries authorised by the respondents. Results indicate a rather broad range of different HRD strategies employed and many problems and barriers encountered in putting preferred HRD strategies into practice. Explanations, implications, and limitations of the findings are discussed.

Introduction and Background of the Study

The job of HRD professional has been well researched since the 1980s, for example by McLagan in the United States (McLagan & Bedrick, 1983; McLagan, 1989; 1996) and by Nijhof in the Netherlands and other European countries (De Rijk, Mulder, & Nijhof, 1994; Odenthal & Nijhof, 1996; Van Ginkel, Mulder, & Nijhof, 1997). These studies involved extensive surveys to list the key roles, competencies, and outputs of HRD professionals. Comparing the results from the European studies, Valkeavaara (1998) concluded that the roles of organisational change agent, instructor, HRD manager, and programme designer appeared to best define the activities of HRD professionals at the start of the 1990's.

During the 1990s, at least in theory, the role of HRD professionals changed from a traditional emphasis on delivering and organising training to a new focus on facilitating self-directed individual and team learning. Empirical evidence of this change in roles, however, has to date been less than conclusive. For example, Kieft and Nijhof (2000) recently carried out a replication of an earlier large-scale quantitative study, in which no significant changes surfaced as far as Dutch HRD professionals were concerned. The main tasks performed were very similar to the ones found almost a decade earlier: training delivery, training co-ordination, organisation development, and training management. Newer tasks like competence management, knowledge management, quality control, and training purchase were far from widespread, although most respondents agreed on their importance (see also Nijhof, 2002).

Smaller-scale qualitative studies among HRD professionals in Finland and the United Kingdom yielded similar results. Poell and Chivers (1999) conducted a qualitative study in the United Kingdom, interviewing 19 HRD professionals who mainly worked within large corporations or were self-employed. Within the UK context, the system of national vocational qualifications (NVQs) and government programs such as *Investors in People* reflected an

influential tendency towards standardised HRD programs, which is rather at odds with the dominant learning rhetoric. Supporting personal development remained an important field of activity for HR developers, along with organisational consultancy and, unsurprisingly, training delivery. Although managers and employees were increasingly expected to take on responsibility for learning, HRD practitioners encountered resistance to these changes in practice. Managers often tended to resent being made responsible for training issues that were formerly dealt with by trainers. Some trainers themselves resisted taking on a more facilitative consultant-like role. In about half the cases, HR developers experienced a lack of recognition for training issues in organisations.

These results from the UK context are in accordance with a qualitative study among 20 Finnish HRD professionals mainly from public-sector organisations and private enterprises (Valkeavaara, 1999). The ideals of the learning organisation, such as open communication, collaboration, and management involvement, were found to cause problems for HRD professionals. The role of change agent brought unease and uncertainty to their work. Although they saw the expectations and possibilities to act as challenger or change agent, they also perceived the resistance to this activity as problematic to their professional practice.

Tjepkema, Sambrook and Stewart (in press) report on a European-wide study of HRD practices in 28 learning-oriented organisations in seven countries. They point to a gap between normative theories and actual practices: "As structures and cultures change, so do HRD practices and roles. Instead of trainers, HRD practitioners now become consultants, who also have to manage the link between their activities and company strategy. (…) An important element in this changing role is the shift from training to facilitating learning. As this new role for HRD becomes clearer in theory, many uncertainties remain for HRD professionals, especially on the question of how to translate this into practice." Many of the findings do not paint a very innovative picture of current HRD activity. In 23 of the 28 cases, HRD tasks at hand could be labelled as traditional, with providing and co-ordinating training among the most important ones. Although HRD practitioners use many strategies to realise their envisioned role, those related to training are still very significant. Moreover, quite contrary to the dominant rhetoric, "among the least important strategies are instruments and initiatives to increase employee responsibility for learning. (…) These outcomes might indicate that HRD strategies and practices do, to some extent, fall behind HRD visions." Tjepkema et al. (in press) conclude that HRD practices can hardly be called innovative and that they are quite far removed from the HRD visions usually espoused. They quote Horwitz, who remarked: "The HRD literature is somewhat normative and rhetorical in exhorting line managers to take responsibility for training and development. The reality is that this is the exception rather than the norm." (Horwitz, 1999, in Tjepkema et al., in press).

Tjepkema, Stewart, Sambrook, Mulder, Ter Horst, and Scheerens (2002) provide a more extensive account of the aforementioned European study. Although the final conclusion refers to "empirical evidence of a changing role for HRD professionals and an increasing responsibility for HRD activities among managers and employees" (p. 187), both the practical extent of those expected changes and the actual realisation of new responsibilities can be questioned. The cases in the study were selected because the organisations were known to be learning oriented. Even so, the authors found that "supporting the business (objectives) is one of the most important HRD objectives, but survey results suggest that this involvement is usually not very great" (p. 161). Contrary to, for example, Kieft & Nijhof (2000), whose work is missing from the literature review of the European study, these authors also encountered more innovative HRD roles, including supporting informal learning and knowledge sharing. However, "a substantial amount of HRD professionals' work of course consists of developing and providing formal training" (p. 168). So, while the boundaries between HRD and the business are becoming blurred, traditional HRD strategies still play an important role.

Problem Statement and Research Questions

The question that arises from this brief overview of empirical studies is to what extent HRD strategies in practice are in line with theoretical ideas espoused in much of the HRD literature base. No single answer to this question can be given on the basis of the overview presented, however the gap between theory and practice in this area still seems considerable and, therefore, worthy of further investigation. This means there is a need for descriptive and explanatory studies into actual HRD practices among those immediately concerned (cf. Hytonen, 2002).

The current study focuses on the actual strategies that HRD professionals employ to organise learning programmes for workers, in order to find out how this part of their job is currently being shaped. To what extent is its traditional emphasis on delivering and organising training really being replaced by a new focus on facilitating self-directed employee learning? The aim of the study is to contribute to the discussion about the discrepancy between HRD theory and organisational practices in this domain. The following <u>research questions</u> will thus be investigated:

1. What strategies do HRD practitioners employ to organise learning programmes, in relationship to the roles of other strategic actors?
2. What problems and barriers do HRD practitioners encounter in translating their ideal vision of organising learning programmes into reality?

Theoretical Framework: Learning-Network Theory

In view of the many-faceted nature of HRD, and of changes in HRD, a theoretical framework is required that pays attention to diversity and dynamics in organisational reality. In the learning-network theory, HRD professionals are considered strategic actors, who interact with managers and workers to organise learning programmes by negotiation, collaboration, and participation processes (Van der Krogt, 1998; Poell, 1998). From this theoretical perspective, the learning that takes place in any organisation can be characterised by structural arrangements associated with liberal, vertical, horizontal, or external types of learning programme.

In a *liberal* learning programme, individual workers create their own sets of learning activities. The profile of this learning programme can be labelled as unstructured and individually oriented, since there is little structure above the individual level. A *vertical* learning programme is characterised by linear planning of learning activities. The management develops learning policies, which are translated into pre-designed learning activities by HRD professionals and delivered to the workers. In a *horizontal* learning programme, learning activities develop incrementally while they are being executed. There are no pre-designed learning policies. These develop by learning from experience as the programmes progress. HRD professionals are process counsellors in this type of learning network. An *external* learning programme is co-ordinated from outside the organisation by the workers' professional associations. It introduces a work innovation to the learners, who adapt their work themselves accordingly.

Other strategic actors (e.g., workers and managers) are expected to influence the way in which the learning programme is organised as much as HRD professionals do. Organising a learning programme is viewed as an arena where constant processes of negotiation and collaboration among the participants shape and change the way actual learning arrangements come about. Table 1 presents the main characteristics of the four theoretical types of learning programme that the learning-network theory distinguishes (Van der Krogt, 1998; Poell, 1998).

Table 1
Main Characteristics of Four Theoretical Types of Learning Programme.

	Liberal	Vertical	Horizontal	External
Content Structure (Profile)	Unstructured, individually oriented	Heavily pre-structured, task oriented	Thematically structured, problem oriented	Methodically structured, profession oriented
Organisational Structure (Relations)	Loosely coupled, contractual	Centralised, formalised	Egalitarian, group based	Externally inspired, professional
Development of Learning Processes	Individuals create own learning programme to solve their problems	HRD staff make management policy into training programme	Group learning programme develops incrementally while being undertaken	Workers adapt work to innovations from professional association
Role of HRD Professional	Facilitating individual learning arrangements	Designing and delivering training programmes	Facilitating group learning arrangements	Help professionals adapt work to external innovation

This framework is used to investigate the strategies employed by HRD professionals in organising learning programmes. The current reference point, albeit a negative one, for many organisations is the vertical learning network (typical of a machine bureaucracy), in which HRD professionals design and deliver training programmes. The tendency towards self-directed and team learning advocated promoted in literature can be understood as a desired move away from the vertical to a more liberal or horizontal type of learning network. The strategies of HRD professionals would change accordingly, from designing and delivering training programmes to facilitating multiple learning arrangements for individual and team learners. The four different learning-programme types (Van der Krogt, 1998; Poell, 1998) will thus be used to interpret the changes occurring in the strategies of HRD professionals.

Regardless of the specific type, three phases can be distinguished in the creation of any learning programme: the orientation phase, the learning and optimising phase, and the continuation phase (Poell & Van der Krogt, 2003). These will be briefly outlined below.

A learning programme begins with the idea of an actor to learn about a particular theme with a group. The *orientation phase* is mainly about getting those involved interested in learning systematically about that theme (mobilising the actors) and developing a well-informed plan of action to which they will be willing and able to commit themselves (analysing the learning theme). The team members express what they expect from each other (drawing up a learning contract) and make arrangements about the conditions that are necessary to execute the learning programme and to achieve the results they are aiming for (contextualising the learning programme).

During the *learning phase*, the actors elaborate upon the ideas about the learning programme that they have developed during the orientation phase. This core phase essentially involves the execution and optimisation of the learning programme. During the execution of the programme, the actors learn about a theme related to their work (learning in interaction). They learn also, however, about the organisation of their learning programme Continual attempts are made to learn from experiences and in doing so to improve the learning programme (quality control).

Learning does not come to a halt once the programme has ended; it is a continuous activity. That is why following-up on those activities is of crucial importance in the *continuation phase*. Learning programmes are followed-up on in two ways. Firstly, the group members resume their own individual learning paths (giving them fresh impetus). Secondly, on the basis of experience gained during the leaning programme, the organisation can learn to set up and execute new learning programmes (improving its learning system).

Obviously, in practice not all three phases are necessarily conducted in a highly systematic manner. The core activities of each phase may be less structured in an actual learning programme. An elaboration of the learning-network theory, the three-phase framework will be used in this study to analyse the data on learning programmes organised by HRD professionals.

Research Method

The current study is a replication and update in the Dutch context of a study previously conducted by Poell and Chivers (1999) in the United Kingdom. This section describes the selection of respondents, the way data were collected and analysed, and some characteristics of the sample.

Selection of Respondents
All alumni since 1990 from the University of Nijmegen programme in HRD whose recent address details could be traced (n=96) were sent a short questionnaire in February 2001. This contained a number of general questions about their current workplaces, jobs, tasks, working methods, and about their willingness to participate in the further study. The initial response rate was 22 per cent (n=21), of which half were not interested in further participation (main reason being: not working in HRD). Contact was made with the other 11 who did express an interest, after which a snowball-sampling procedure was initiated among participants and university staff to reach the desired number of 20 respondents. Only people who had actually graduated in HRD in Nijmegen and who had a job in HRD were selected as part of the respondents group.

Data Collection
Twenty respondents were interviewed throughout spring 2001 using a semi-standardised topic list. Fourteen interviews were held face-to-face (eight at the workplace of the respondent, four at the workplace of the researcher, two elsewhere). For practical reasons six interviews were held by telephone. Topics on the list included:
- Organisational mission, structure, culture, clients.
- Participant's job, typical work activities.
- Current role as an HRD professional, tasks and responsibilities, role changes, future role.
- Problems experienced in work, barriers to organising learning, possible solutions.
- Relationship with management and employees, their role in organising learning, attuning different strategies and values.
- Strategy employed in a recent, typical learning programme.

An attempt was made to distinguish between espoused theories and theories in use (Argyris & Schön, 1978) by focusing the interview on one recent concrete learning programme for which respondents had held responsibility. If it became obvious during an interview that the respondent was talking only about a highly successful learning programme, an attempt was made to talk about strategies, problems and barriers on a more general level (e.g., by using 'what-if' type questions, by making the interpretation of the researcher explicit right away, by asking follow-up questions and making frequent summaries). Afterwards, each interview was summarised on paper (approximately four to six pages) by the interviewer and sent to the participant for verification. Sixteen written summaries were returned with comments. In some cases this made it necessary to ask a number of additional questions in order to get the

interpretation right. The analysis was based on sixteen verified and four initial interview summaries.

Data Analysis

Text material from twenty interview summaries was divided into 382 segments (meaningful paragraphs). A software programme for qualitative analysis called Kwalitan (Peters & Wester, 1990) was used to attach codes to all relevant segments. In a process of constant comparison the initial number of over 800 different codes was reduced to a total of 284. These were clustered and then brought under the heading of six main categories derived from the initial study by Poell and Chivers (1999): 1) Contextual Changes, 2) Trends in HRD, 3) Learning Activities in Use, 4) Roles in HRD, 5) Strategies of HRD Professionals, and 6) Problems and Barriers. The whole data reduction process was conducted by one researcher, who frequently consulted one co-researcher who had carried out the initial UK study, and sometimes consulted another co-researcher who was an expert in the underlying theoretical framework. The first research question was answered by summarising the contents of the fifth category, the second one through the sixth category. In the context of this paper, for lack of space the first four categories will not be presented as specific outcomes. Their contents do, however, contribute to the over-all image that can be painted of the main work conducted by HRD professionals.

Some Characteristics of the Sample

As Table 2 shows, 14 respondents were female and 6 male. Half of the sample (n=10) worked internally within one organisation's HRD function, whereas the other half worked in an HRD agency external to their client organisations. Most respondents (n=9) had graduated in the last three years, six respondents (30 per cent) in the three years before that, and five respondents (25 per cent) in the three years even before that. This means that more than half of the sample graduated relatively recently and has less than three years of work experience. Although respondents were not asked about their age, it was obvious that most of them were in their early to mid-twenties, with a small minority of much more experienced people in their forties (who had mainly studied as part-timers). Job roles of our respondents varied widely, although trainer (n=12), counsellor (n=8), and consultant (n=7) were among the most frequently mentioned. Other job roles that came to the fore included: manager or supervisor, training co-ordinator, developer, and policy staff member.

Table 2
Distribution of Sex, Job Position, Graduation Year, and Job Title across the Sample (N=20)

Sex		Job Position	
- female	14	- internal	10
- male	6	- external	10
Job Role		**Year of Graduation**	
- Trainer	12	- 1993 to 1995	5
- (Educational or Training) Counsellor	8	- 1996 to 1998	6
- Consultant	7	- 1999 to 2001	11
- (Project) Manager or Supervisor	5		
- Training Co-ordinator	3		
- Developer	2		
- Policy Staff Member	2		

Results

This section contains the results from the qualitative analysis of the semi-structured interviews held with twenty HRD professionals. Firstly, the strategies they employ in organising learning programmes will be presented. Secondly, we will focus on the problems and barriers they experience in learning-programme creation.

Strategies Employed in Learning-Programme Creation
Many different strategies of HRD professionals to organise learning-programmes emerged from the data. In this paragraph these will be presented relative to the three main phases of the learning programme in which they were used: the orientation, learning and optimising, and continuation phases. Table 3 summarises the main strategies for each of the three phases.

Table 3
Main Strategies Used by HRD Professionals in Organising Learning Programmes.

1. Orientation phase
a. Negotiating flexibility
b. Integral approach
c. Delegating responsibility
d. Context orientation
2. Learning and optimising phase
a. Encouraging self-responsibility
b. Ensuring 'learnability'
c. Work customisation
3. Continuation phase
a. Reflection on work and learning

The Orientation Phase
Four core strategies for the orientation phase came up during the interviews, which will be described below. Each of these was employed by about half of this study's sample of twenty HRD professionals.

    Negotiating flexibility. An important strategy in this respect is to set up learning programmes in a flexible manner. This involves much negotiation with the client, usually management, about the conditions under which the learning programme will run. HRD professionals often try to claim a considerable amount of slack to organise such programmes according to their own standards. A great deal of persuasion and/or prior contact with the client is needed, however, for HRD professionals to be granted the necessary flexibility. One respondent, a training consultant (young, female) working in a large higher education institution, put it as follows: *"It is important for a consultant to search for the preconditions, then 'demand' maximum freedom within those boundaries. This freedom enables you to take up a position of your own in different projects, and the responsibilities that go with it."*

    Integral approach. A second strategy that HRD professionals employ can be labelled as the use of an integral approach to organising learning programmes. They try to prevent learning programmes from being isolated efforts by involving 'the whole organisation' and by integrating learning with work. This involves creating conditions for transfer of learning to the workplace, for example, having management as sponsor or co-participant in the learning programme. For example, one of the respondents was a training consultant (male) with quite a few years of experience, who talked about a project he carried out for a local council: *"My client wanted to encourage self-management in employees. As always, my project proposal included some preliminary inquiry. I wanted to know how employees themselves felt about this development.*

They told me 'That's all very nice, but first many other changes have to be made here'. *The client was informed about this internal problem and the project proposal was adjusted so as to reflect it."*

Delegating responsibility. Thirdly, HRD professionals use a strategy of delegating responsibility for learning to core actors in the organisation, usually first-line or middle management. This can entail a frequent feedback relationship or, more intensive, asking supervisors to act as coach or mentor to workers in the learning programme. It has to be noted here that this new responsibility usually takes a good deal of getting used to on the part of the supervisors or managers. Not all of them are ready or prepared to take on new learning roles, although in the following case it worked out well: *"The kick-off session should get people thinking, encourage them to make their own views explicit. I'm present all ten ensuing days just to stress the importance of the project, although it is organised by the operational manager and a police officer. I have end responsibility, so I want to know about their plans."* (An experienced police manager with a large interest in HRD, male).

Context orientation. A fourth strategy refers to an active orientation on the way in which learning and work take place in the client organisation. This was achieved by, for instance, organising a large-scale kick-off meeting or brainstorm session, talking to managers and workers in various departments, holding intake sessions with participants, setting up the learning programme with the help of well-informed key players within the organisation. It also involves gaining insight into earlier attempts at organisational change and/or previous training efforts. For instance, a consultant (experienced, male) working with school leaders said: *"No matter what the learning theme is, I always explicitly ask them what their workplace looks like. The differences and similarities give me ideas and points for discussion, which I then use for a joint learning process."*

Other strategies. Besides the four core strategies just described, respondents reported a large number of other strategies employed in the orientation phase. These were each mentioned by approximately a quarter of the sample in this study. They are briefly elaborated upon below.

- Mobilising support; from both intended participants and other core organisational actors.
- Ensuring commitment; countering resistance and creating a basis for self-responsibility for learning in workers, supervisors, and management.
- Problem clarification; getting behind the initial training question with the client, usually management, and learning group members to find the underlying 'real problem'. Incidentally, this can boil down to a learning programme in itself for management.
- Pre-structuring learning; designing a didactically sound learning programme for the learning group, taking into account transfer enhancing measures.

The Learning and Optimising Phase
In the core phase of learning and optimisation, three important strategies stand out from the data, which will be elaborated upon below. Each strategy was used by approximately half of this study's sample.

Encouraging self-responsibility. HRD professionals increasingly expect workers to take responsibility for their own learning. They are encouraged to draw up a development plan for themselves, they are asked to come up with critical questions, they are given room to influence what and how they learn within the programme. The HRD professional acts as a counsellor rather than designer of the learning process. After the learning programme finishes, workers should be able to communicate about these matters with their supervisors rather than with the HRD professional. A policy staff member (experienced, female) working in a vocational training college gave the following illustration: *"I decide about the structure and approach of the programme, but the participants decide about the content. Being self-directed is a thing that some teachers experience as difficult. They are kings in their own classrooms and have never had to talk to their colleagues about these things. I take on the role of a coach to facilitate their learning process."*

Ensuring 'learnability'. HRD professionals try to tune the learning programme to the learning views of the workers. This involves taking into account their preferred learning styles, their self-perceived learning needs, and their private theories on how they learn best.

These elements all serve to create a better fit between the learning programme and the learning characteristics of the participating workers. For one illustration: *"We have a programme for mechanics, in which they service the equipment in small groups, guided by a trainer. A special group of 'pioneer mechanics' was formed, who provide work instructions and support to the other mechanics. This approach works well for this group of people. Mechanics are real doers, so they learn best by just doing their job in their own workplace."* (A consultant working in the training department of Dutch Railways, young, female).

Work customisation. Similarly, HRD professionals attempt to tune the learning programme to the work views of the participants. They want to find out about the ideas of the workers themselves on how the work should be done and how it can be improved. This information is then used to integrate learning and work within the programme. For example, the training consultant who worked with the local council continued his story: *"When all this criticism and frustration in employees came to the fore, I helped them get to grips with it. I encouraged them to do some action planning based on a list of practical problems and on their own ideas about working efficiently. The different teams discussed these ideas together and made them collective. The client agreed to this approach."*

Other strategies. Besides these three core strategies in the learning and optimising phase, respondents reported many other strategies in use. Each of the following was mentioned by about a quarter of the respondents in this study.

- Process consultation; offering guidance to participants throughout the programme about their individual learning processes.
- Encouraging action planning; helping workers figure out how they can make the most of what they have learnt in their work and careers.
- Participant involvement; encouraging participants to bring up personal experiences, to yield ideas for the learning programme, to create links to organisational practice.
- Broadening learning; making people aware that learning can take place in many contexts and how they can use these for their own development.
- Organisational relevance; ensuring that the learning programme remains in line with other current initiatives and recent developments in work and in the organisation.
- Alternative activities; helping participants to make a better fit between the original programme and other promising learning activities or situations they can access.

The Continuation Phase

Only one important strategy for the continuation phase emerged from our data, which approximately one third of the sample used: *Reflection on work and learning.* This involves evaluating the way in which the learning programme has been organised and drawing out lessons for the follow up. HRD professionals facilitate such processes for workers with a view to implementing what was learned during the programme and, simultaneously, increasing their learning capacities. One example came from the consultant working with school leaders: *"Throughout the whole programme, participants create a portfolio focusing on their development and behaviour, on workplace characteristics and best practices associated with those. People can use the portfolio to tap into new developments, not just to evaluate them but also to legitimise their own learning process."*

Problems and Barriers for HRD Professionals in Learning-Programme Creation

Five distinct problematic areas emerged from the interviews with our twenty respondents, which will be described below. For each area we will also focus on the way in which HRD professionals try to deal with these problems and barriers. Table 4 summarises the main problems and barriers encountered by our sample.

Table 4
Main Problems and Barriers for HRD Professionals, and How They Deal with Them

Problems and Barriers	Ways to Deal with Problems and Barriers
• Dependent position of HRD • Resistance to change in workers • Lack of transfer of training • Inappropriate organisational context • Distant role of management	• Persuasion, adaptation, flexibility, and clarification • Focus on positive elements • Create intensive programmes, work on learning climate and transfer-sensitive workplaces • Collaboration with all relevant actors

Dependent Position of HRD
A large majority of our respondents experienced problems and barriers as a result of the dependent position of the HRD function. For external consultants, this takes the shape of commercial pressures being at odds with the quality standards that they should like to uphold in their work. HRD professionals are dependent on their clients to grant them the necessary room to create a 'good learning programme'. This is illustrated by a training consultant working in a large drug company (young, female): *"The training co-ordinator and top management decide on the content and organisation of our training programme, and on examination. I give educational recommendations to the consultation group, but management gets the final say. To what extent my recommendations make it to the final training programme depends also on the person you happen to be talking to, their idea of learning and if they value certain contents."*

In order to deal with these problems, HRD professionals try to persuade clients of their learning vision. Adaptation and flexibility are other important features of successful HRD efforts. Finally, it helps to clarify the expectations and responsibilities of HRD professionals and other actors early in the programme, so as to prevent misunderstanding.

Resistance to Change
A similar large majority of this study's sample encountered resistance to change in participants of the learning programme. It takes time for workers to get used to being self-responsible for their own learning and development. This should really be a gradual process. Cultural differences can also prevent this shift of responsibility from succeeding. Besides, the fact that workers can have different interests is a hampering factor as well. A training designer (young, female) who did a job for the Child Welfare Council said: *"Our approach was to show people that our model works. It was important for the trainers to give room to feelings of resistance and to listen to the people expressing them. The organisation had tried to implement this kind of programme before, which cost a lot of energy and in the end led to nothing."*

HRD professionals try to deal with these problems by focusing on the positive elements that are already in place, for instance, earlier programmes that were successful, workers who display great learning readiness or a critically reflective stance.

Transfer of Training
About half of the sample indicated problems leading to a lack of learning transfer, for example, time pressure, a learning programme that is too limited in scope, too little room for adjustments during the programme, bad timing, or unclear training needs.

HRD professionals prefer long-ranging learning programmes to prevent these problems from occurring. In this connection, they also try to work on a better learning climate and towards transfer-sensitive workplaces in the organisation. A training consultant (male, experienced) working in a small agency with a broad variety of different clients gave his own outlook: *"I ask unconditional commitment to my approach from participants and from the company as a whole. If a client does not agree to a training needs analysis, no matter how big or small the assignment, then the deal is off. I also prefer to do long-term projects."*

Organisational Context
In view of the latter attempt it should, however, be mentioned that a minority of our sample mentions also that the organisational context in which the learning programme takes place can cause problems. They signal a work environment not very conducive to learning, an inappropriate learning climate, transfer preventing factors in the workplace, or a dominant focus on training solutions rather than an attempt to deal with underlying organisational problems. A training consultant (young, female) working for a large agency put is thus: *"We hold up a mirror to our clients so they see elements of the problem, which can be tough for them even though we do it with respect. You have to find out when you go too far or when you've reached the core. This way of working often causes resistance, but after a while people pick up on it. Generally, they want to learn but don't know how to do it."*

Role of Management
A similar minority of respondents perceived problems associated with the role of management, for instance, if it does not recognise the importance of learning, if it is unwilling to co-operate with HRD professionals for a programme, if managers hold views that are at odds with a focus on learning, or if they resist the changes that will come with the programme. In the words of the consultant from Dutch Railways: *"Project leaders often encounter resistance from the client. These people cannot get their heads around the idea that a training course is not always the solution to a problem."*

To prevent problems with both the organisational context and the role of management, HRD professionals focus on collaboration with all relevant actors in a learning programme. This involves clarification of the roles and responsibilities of all concerned, working towards a good relationship and mutual understanding with management, trying to encourage a learning orientation in key players, and influencing the learning views of all those concerned in a programme (from managers to supervisors and from work coaches to trainers).

Discussion

Conclusions from the Present Study
The image arising from the data of the learning-programme creation strategies employed by HRD professionals is many-sided. With the exception of the external type, all other types of strategy - for creating liberal, vertical, and horizontal learning programmes - were well encountered in the sample.

Probably the most prominent strategies used by HRD professionals in this study come under the heading of facilitating individual development (associated with liberal learning programmes). This is certainly the case with strategies like delegation of responsibility for development and encouraging self-responsibility in learners. The focus on ensuring 'learnability', gearing learning programmes to individual needs and preferences, can be understood likewise. HRD professionals attempt to create liaisons with work supervisors and managers in order to get them more involved in learning programmes for their workers. Unfortunately, many of the core problems perceived by our respondents point to the fact that this is probably the most difficult part of their current job. They encounter resistance to change in workers, are confronted with a distant role of management, find an inappropriate organisational context to live up to their ideals.

This difficult position, one of dependence from the client, could be the reason why many HRD professionals still start out creating learning programmes using strategies associated with vertical arrangements. Once the framework of conditions has been set by the client (usually management), once HRD professionals have negotiated the necessary flexibility and slack to operate, they gradually introduce more strategies linked to liberal and horizontal learning arrangements. Hence the focus on employing an integral approach and a thorough orientation on the existing organisational context in the orientation phase, followed by more attention to self-responsibility, 'learnability', work customisation, and reflection on

work and learning in the latter phases of learning programmes. Another reason for the continuing prevalence of strategies associated with vertical learning programmes can be the fact that many organisations are still characterised by relatively bureaucratic structures, which lend themselves well to more traditional HRD roles (cf. Kieft & Nijhof, 2000; Nijhof, 2002).

Strategies associated with external learning programmes were virtually absent from the data. This is interesting in view of the fact that about half of the sample concerned professional organisations, where such innovative programmes would certainly be expected. Although this result has been found also in earlier studies (e.g., Poell & Chivers, 1999), one can only speculate about the explanation why this be the case. There is some evidence, however, that HRD professionals are inclined to use the vertical strategies preferred by management, supplemented by horizontal and liberal arrangements more in line with their own occupational perspective (Poell, Van der Krogt, & Wildemeersch, 1999). Another explanation could be that professionals working in these organisations use their own external circles for learning and development purposes, relatively detached from management and internal HRD interference (Van der Krogt, 1998).

Typically, far fewer strategies are used in the continuation phase than in the learning and optimising phase and in the orientation phase. This is reflected in the problems that HRD professionals experience in terms of learning transfer. One would expect such problems to be most prominent in vertical learning programmes, since liberal arrangements would prevent transfer problems through individual tailoring and horizontal structures are explicitly focused on establishing transfer through the integration of learning and work. It is obvious that HRD professionals see the importance of such alternatives and attempt to put them to work, but they also experience many problems in doing so. They have to use persuasion, adaptation, flexibility, and clarification of intent to overcome such problems, focus on innovative learning practices that are already in place in order to build upon those. When given ample leeway, HRD professionals set out to create intensive learning programmes, to work on the learning climate, and to develop transfer-sensitive workplaces. Collaboration with all relevant actors is at the heart of the HRD professional's strategy, they see themselves as linking pins on the organisational learning field.

The data from our sample indicates that HRD professionals use a diversity of strategies associated with liberal, vertical, and horizontal learning arrangements. However, they also experience problems introducing new ways of self-directed individual and team learning, most notably resistance to such change in managers, supervisors, and workers, who are all supposed to play new roles in this connection. Compared with other recent studies described at the outset of this paper (Valkeavaara, 1998; 1999; Kieft & Nijhof, 2000; Hytonen, 2002; Tjepkema et al., 2002; Nijhof, 2002; Tjepkema et al., in press), the current study contains fresh evidence that HRD professionals are certainly trying to put their ideals about facilitating employee learning to practice. In relation to the earlier study conducted in the United Kingdom three years ago (Poell & Chivers, 1999), it seems the Dutch respondents have managed to find more ways to actually implement these ideals, although there are still many similar problems and barriers as well.

Limitations of the Study
There are a number of other limitations to this claim that have to be highlighted. Firstly, the fact that respondents perhaps did not mention certain strategies or problems during the semi-structured interviews does not in itself mean that they do not exist. Here, a more standardised questionnaire could be of assistance for further research. Secondly, data were collected from HRD professionals only. Interviews with managers and workers should be held to check for different interpretations. Thirdly, the results are based on a small, select sample of 20 HRD professionals with a specific background (having completed a University of Nijmegen degree in HRD) in one specific country (the Netherlands). Interviews should be conducted with HRD professionals from other universities and in other countries to check for specificity. Fourthly, it is the impression of the researchers that most respondents have

selected a highly successful learning programme for a case to be discussed in depth. An attempt was made to control for this effect by asking 'what if'-type questions and by following up on problems and barriers that were experienced by the respondents. Even so, it is entirely possible that the selected cases are not representative of 'average' learning programmes organised by these HRD professionals. This could also explain why more strategies than expected on the basis of earlier research were linked to liberal and horizontal arrangements.

Explanations for the Findings

There are some explanations to be considered for the finding in this study that the Dutch respondents seem to use more strategies associated with liberal and horizontal learning programmes than their British counterparts did three years ago.

Firstly, the two samples are quite different in a number of ways. Whereas the HRD professionals who had graduated from the University of Nijmegen are mainly females in their twenties with relatively little work experience, the Sheffield alumni were mostly males in their forties with a lot of work experience (some of that in HRD jobs). These differences can impact on the situation in which these respondents find themselves within their respective organisations.

Secondly, the graduate programmes of the two universities differ in a number of ways. Whereas Sheffield was using a distance learning format with some residential weekends for its courses, Nijmegen employs a more traditional curriculum of face-to-face classes and collaborative group work. As far as the content of the programmes is concerned, Sheffield seems to be more focused on strategic HRD, whereas Nijmegen uses an actor perspective on learning in work organisations.

Thirdly, perhaps the learning climate of Dutch and British companies is influenced by national cultural differences. In the Netherlands consensus thinking is the preferred model also within industrial relations (the so-called *polder-model*), while the Anglo-Saxon corporate culture is more often associated with hierarchical models (Kieft & Nijhof, 2000; Nyhan, Kelleher, Cressey, & Poell, in press). Consensus thinking fits very well with horizontal learning arrangements and certainly goes a lot better with liberal than vertical learning strategies. This could be a topic for further research (cf. Koornneef, Oostvogel, Poell, & Harris, 2002).

Fourthly, there could be a time factor involved. In three years many things can change also in the way HRD professionals employ learning-programme strategies. If there is such a thing as a general tendency towards more liberal and horizontal types of learning, this could be an indication of that development over time.

Finally, two issues associated with data collection and analysis spring to mind. As mentioned before, it is likely that our respondents have chosen quite successful projects as cases for this study. In other words, the results reported here may not be considered representative for the learning programmes in general that they organise. Also, data analysis was different from the initial British study, in that the Dutch study used the analytic categories that had come out of the first one. Of course these had to be amended with new information and data categories not present in the British study. It is possible that these differences in the data analysis process have affected the outcomes as well.

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