

Current HRD Trends in the Netherlands: Conceptualization and Practices

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This contribution reviews literature concerning current HRD developments. The resulting literature outcomes have been discussed with a group of experts in the field of HRD. The remarks of this group, consisting of both academics as well as practitioners, has been used to outline a conceptual framework on current HRD developments and to illustrate the conceptual framework with examples of practices concerning HRD developments in the (late) nineties.

Keywords: Trends, Organizational practices, Expert opinions

There appears to be a large discrepancy between the reality in HRD practices and contemporary theories on HRD developments. Firstly, training and intentional learning do not occur frequently, and development processes do not happen as systematically and consciously as assumed. Besides, there is evidence that learning opportunities are unequally divided across the workforce, with managers and higher level employees enjoying relatively privileged positions.

It seems obvious that changes in job requirements due to continuously increasing employability demands necessitate to pay attention to the fit between demands and supplies in the domain of professional development. Nevertheless, it may be questioned whether proposed theoretical solutions are applicable and emergent in practice, which is considered as a second discrepancy (Senge, 1990). Especially in the domain of organizational learning “too often, rhetoric and conceptualization do not seem to lead to any substantial progress in theory-building or in practice in the field” (Harrison, 2000, p. 254).

The discrepancy between HRD theory and practice urges us to confront theorizing in the field with empirical outcomes. It is important to find out to what extent attention is paid to organizing, shaping and managing the processes of learning and development within working organizations. In order to chart this attention, we will go into HRD developments both from some theoretical perspectives as well as grounded with data gathered during working conferences. The aim of this endeavor is to track down both examples of current developments as described in literature, as well as empirical evidence. Moreover, we want to raise opportunities for HRD practitioners to add new insights to (our) theoretical positions and to explore the potential of a powerful source in building theory within the HRD domain. Both in review and data collection we kept a focus on large companies as the infrastructure for human resource development was expected to be most prevalent in these.

Theoretical Outlines

In the coming sections the literature on HRD developments in the (late) nineties is reported. A division in three areas of description has been made, i.e. developments outside working organizations, developments inside working organizations, and developments within the domain of HRD.

Developments outside Working Organizations

During the last ten years our economy has transformed into a knowledge economy (McLagan, 1999). The implications this entails for qualification requirements are considerably. As the life-cycles of occupations and functions offered by organizations have shortened tremendously in the last twenty years, mastering learning and coping strategies and the transferability of these seem to be important topics for psychological and development research in organizations (Boerlijst, Munnichs & Van der Heijden, 1998).

Yet, only in the last two decades have career researchers started to pay attention to the idea of development

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throughout one's career (Hall, 1986; Van der Heijden, 1998). This attention shows the growing concern about professional development throughout the working life. Because of the importance of continuously updating knowledge and skills, both the organization and the individual are held responsible for optimizing this development interactively.

Individuals who are able to survive the emergence of the information society, the internationalization of the economy and scientific and technological progress, are the ones with the most up-to-date knowledge and skills, but also with the capability to continuously build up new expertise requirements. Next to the computerization, the increasing globalization, internationalization, and continuously changing markets and products, one can detect changes in customer needs and behavior (see for example the increase in ecologically sound products). More and more companies privatize and are driven by market economy concepts. Obviously these changes too have many implications for the job requirements of individual employees, as innovation and technological changes poses strong demands on developing communicative and problem-solving skills (Horwitz, 1999; OECD, 2000).

Information and communication technology (ICT) is an aspect that burdens heavily on the necessary knowledge and skills to perform well in nowadays jobs. Also one can notice an increase in the use of ICT in training and development programs, both in schools as well as in company settings (Rosenberg, 2001). The latter, obviously, aggravates appeals to the individual employee in an era wherein workloads are already impressively high.

Demographic changes like the increase in women participating onto the labor market, the increasing participation of ethnic minorities, aging of the workforce and the ongoing dejuvenization have necessitated the attention for the guidance of life-long employability. Training and development programs ought to be tailored to the specific needs of classes of employees in order to increase chances of assimilation into the labor market.

Besides, more and more formal certifications are expected in order to guarantee the value of educational activities. This is why checks as to the content of educational programs and HRD programs, in general, deserve serious attention. In all sectors of higher education and vocational training one can see an increase in the attention towards customer needs. Besides, more and more one strives for a fine-tuning in educational programs with practice. For example developments like competence-based curricula, dualizing and contract education.

If the former is combined with the concerns of HRD professionals as to how to cope with the labor shortage in many areas, one can imagine the pressure that is felt by the profession as a whole.

Developments inside Working Organizations

In all sectors of the labor market one of the key changes has been the growing urge to monitor organizational aims in order to come to meet flexibility requirements, quality requirements and reduction of costs. A result has been an increasing flattening of organizations, working with business units and outsourcing of non-core tasks.

Besides, a number of developments have taken place, performance-orientation being the most far-reaching. Tayloristic modes of organizing have been changed with principles like job-enrichment and team working. In higher level jobs more and more employees telework which enables them a high amount of quantitative flexibility without losing the possibilities to keep in touch with colleagues both inside and outside the organization (E-mail, internet, mobile telephones, fax).

The increased attention for performance enhancement has enlarged the popularity of the concept of the learning organization (Brinkerhoff & Gill, 1994). The perspective of the *learning organization* is aimed at optimizing learning processes of both individual employees as well as the working organization as a whole (Marsick & Watkins, 1999). Despite the fact that many organizations have faced difficulties in translating the philosophy behind the concept in concrete management activities (Garvin, 2000), attention for the subject has led to an increase in developmental activities (Senge, Roberts, Ross, Smith, Roth & Kleiner, 1999).

More and more top management really pays attention to on-the-job learning, implicit learning processes, knowledge sharing and improvements in working processes, products or services (Gourlay, 2001; Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995). Middle management, on the other hand, is expected to guide individual career development by means of job evaluations, assessment of training and development needs, coaching and so on. Yet, in earlier studies we have found a scarcity and often a complete absence of managerial actions or measures taken to stimulate the employee's further growth and development of his or her flexibility or versatility. Supervisors often observe a declining *learning value* (that is to say the value which the function has as nutrient for the employee's further development) of the functions of their aging employees but do not seem to react to it by enhancing this value. The function becomes void of learning stimuli and new learning challenges. This can even happen in higher level jobs that are extremely important for the organization and perhaps highly complex and demanding.

Yet, guiding the individual career development is not only the responsibility of management in working organizations. Employees themselves are also expected to put a lot of effort and energy in improving their employability. Both the individual and his or her immediate supervisor should be engaged actively in the development of the individual's capabilities. In addition to training and development programs it is important to provide work experience with opportunities to use talents and to develop professional expertise, preferably in more than one area of expertise. The employees themselves are the ones who have to take an entrepreneurial approach to their own career development (Rhebergen & Wognum, 1996), and to display a learning attitude. It requires a 'hunger' for activities that benefit further growth.

Opposite to the need to enlarge one's employability, maybe even in an external sense implying that the employee's attractiveness for competitors increases as well, organizations try to guard the commitment from the employee towards the organization. More and more, flexworkers, part-time workers and knowledge workers question the need for a high amount of commitment to one particular organization. Next to the tension between the need to enlarging the amount of employability and guiding the commitment, problems entailed by increasing work loads and burnout issues force the different management layers in a continuing dialogue with the employees in order to deal carefully with the fit between the worker and the job (Kwakman, 2001).

Developments within the Domain of HRD

Obviously, the previously mentioned developments have implications for the performances that are required and thus for the job content and organization of individual jobs (Torraco, 1999). More and more job requirements have to be expanded with key qualifications like eagerness to learn, flexibility, and readiness to work together in teams. Besides, vocational training is not enough to enable the employee to function qualitatively well throughout the career. Life-long learning and competence development is considered to be the key answer (Garavan, Heraty & Barnicle, 1999). Short-term attention for career development in which employees are used to fulfil organizational goals that do exist in the here-and-now do not longer guarantee the individual employability in a longer sense. Due to enormous changes in professional fields life-long employment has been replaced by life-long employability which can only be reached in case both management as well as the employee anticipate as to which professional developments have to be attained (Kwakman, 1999). The latter can imply that short-term goals are not longer put in front in each and every case. This brings about the challenging though difficult to reach need for HRD specialists to find an equilibrium between organizational interests (need for high performances) and individual interests, e.g. the need for self-actualization (Confessore & Smith, 1998).

The increasing attention for life-long learning has led to a change in the way learning processes are organized. More and more HRD specialists start to recognize the value of other forms of training and development, for example 'training-on-the-job', computer-supported programs, web-based learning, coaching and support on the job (Bassi, Cheney & Lewis, 1998). Besides, training and development is no longer seen as the only solution in order to build up new knowledge and skills. More and more, changes in the organization of work, such as introducing autonomous teams are seen as a possibility to enlarge competence bases (Stahl, Nyhan & D'Aloja, 1993).

The developments that have been outlined so far have altered the role of the HRD specialist. More than before, he or she has to act as a counselor who facilitates line management and individual employees in carrying out the employability-enhancing and learning activities (Ellinger, 1998). In order to integrate knowledge management and competence management into the domain of HRD-practitioners, one has to translate strategic decisions into HRD-policies throughout all organizational layers (Bassi et al., 1998).

Research Methodology

In order to gain insight into the extent to which practitioners agreed on current HRD developments and their impact as outlined in the theoretical paper, the literature results were discussed with them, using principles of the Delphi method. The Delphi method was originally developed by the Rand Corporation in the 1950s as a data collection approach designed for structuring group opinions in order to enable group decision making. By gathering expert opinions (within a homogeneous group of experts) about complex problems consensus is striven for. Consensus is reached by using different rounds of data collection; the researcher organizes, analyzes, and summarizes the different responses and asks experts to respond again. Experts are also asked to provide an explanation for their responses and these explanations play an important role in summarizing and adjusting different responses (Holsapple & Joshi, 2000). As the method is very useful to collect opinions about abstract and rather vague topics, the method is used frequently to anticipate future trends (Leirman, 1995; Ritchie & Earnest, 1999). However, most researchers use a variant of the original method, and a lot of variants have arisen in the literature (Leirman, 1995; Snyder-Halpern, 2001).

In this research we use the variant of the original method which is described by Leirman as a participatory Delphi. In a participatory Delphi an informed group presents all options and evidence for a specific line of reasoning or consideration in order to generate all possible opposing views. We used this variant as we aimed at consensus about the occurrence of current HRD developments in practice but we did not want to exclude opposing or new views otherwise. So, we decided to present the literature results to a group of experts in two rounds. In the first round we discussed our preliminary literature outcomes with a group of HRD practitioners and researchers. As we intended to verify and expand the outcomes, we asked for their opinions about the adequacy and validity of the current developments described. As a result of this, developments were refined, extended, and grouped otherwise whereas also more literature was studied. Then the final outline was written. In the second round we presented this theoretical outline to a group of experts during two working conferences. In these conferences participants were asked to state their opinions as well as reasons underlying their opinions. Participants were also asked to react as to what extent the outline sketches all relevant developments, as well as to sketch opposing viewpoints or experiences. The aim of the procedure was to answer the following questions:

1. To what extent are the developments that have been outlined in the research report significant for your organization?
2. Which developments in the domain of training and development have been taken place in your organization, during the last ten years?

Sampling was purposive, based on a "snowball" sampling strategy as one of the possible strategies in inductive, theory-building analysis (Miles & Huberman, 1994). We tried to compose groups of experts with equal job responsibilities but from different branches of organizations. Eventually, all experts involved were holding jobs, which involved large responsibilities for organizing and managing HRD within large organizations (in the profit- as well as the non-profit sector) in the Netherlands, so can be considered as a homogeneous group.

Results

In the following sections, the outcomes of the two working conferences will be reported. The categories of description are similar to the ones that have been used for the theoretical outlines.

Developments outside Working Organizations

The participating HRD specialists, when asked for external developments, mentioned on the one hand the importance of the 'human factor' and on the other hand the impact in the HRD field of the internationalization and globalization of markets as well as products. Next to these two main areas of change, some participants reported the influence of technological developments and the implications of the job market.

As far as the first factor is concerned, representatives of DAF and DaimlerChrysler gave a good illustration. Nowadays DAF offers solutions for mobility problems instead of producing cars, trucks etceteras. Because of the fact that unique products are created, individual employees are the most important organizational assets. Competencies have to be built up and quality management has to be a core part of HRM practices. At DaimlerChrysler the importance of the human factor has even been formalized. In order to reach high-quality Human Resource Management all HRM-instruments have been integrated and the responsibility for the employee development has been laid down with the employee him or herself. The individual workers are expected to formulate personal development goals and ideas to reach them. Secondly, the focus of the evaluation of the HRD professionals has been changed from their efforts in the area of training and development to the return of investments at the level of the behavior of the individual employee. The latter meaning that HRD-professionals have to make a connection between developmental needs of individual employees and organizational development goals.

As far as the internationalization and globalization are concerned we have five examples of the implications these developments have on a company level. ABN-AMRO has chosen for an approach that focuses on internationalization on an European scale. As a consequence, internal vocational training institutes have become smaller. Whenever possible, vocational training programs are outsourced and the department of training and development nowadays merely has directing and advising tasks.

For Toshiba Medical, the internationalization has led to an increasing pressure in terms of the time that is available to train employees. E-mail, globalization, a growing amount of foreign employees, and the need to commit higher level technicians to the company has led to the need for efficient training programs in much shorter time spans. The primary responsibility for assessing training needs has been moved to the line management in a continuous dialogue with the individual employee. The latter also applies to the TNT Post Group, a holding employing 120.000 people in 120 countries. This decentralization of the training and education function urges to a

translation of strategic higher-order issues to locally feasible practices. In order to provide with this need and to prepare trainers to enormous differences between countries, TNT Post Group has established an academy for trainers.

The fact that internationalization and globalization do not automatically lead to a decrease in training and development activities has further been illustrated by the HRD representative of PriceWaterhouseCoopers. Currently, their training budget is around one billion dollar. Their programs are clearly aimed at enlarging the commitment of the employee towards the organization together with enabling the professionals, who are supposed to be highly employable, to perform qualitatively high. In order to ensure that an employee is suitable to perform services for the organization's customers, a 'license to audit' has to be granted. Besides, team working is encouraged and is supposed to enlarge one's competence base by exchanging valuable knowledge and skills. For the department of T&D these developments have led to the system of 'contracting', i.e. preliminary to the performance of activities, agreements are made regarding who, when and where and what subject will be trained.

For Polaroid Europe we can detect a centralization tendency as a result of the internationalization. Although the different locations are expected to work closely with the central training department in the United States, in practice it is not quite clear in how far one is responsible for formulating strategic goals.

As far as the third factor, i.e. technological developments is concerned, both the representative of Hollandse Signaal Apparaten and the one of the Dutch Air Force went into its consequences. It was reported that next to information and communication technology, advanced technological knowledge of material and products is indispensable for current functioning of these working organizations. At Hollandse Signaal Apparaten one signals the need to get hold of experts both for internal use as well as for their customers. In order to respond to this need three different types of educational programs have been developed, i.e. education for their own employees, education for customers who have bought their materials, and education for their future customers.

For the Dutch Air Force, training and education has always been a focal point. The technical and highly specific requirements for flying a certain plane and also the demands of quality and safety have forced them to large investments in training and development. The responsibility for making reliable assessments of the training needs has been laid down at the line management.

As regards the last mentioned topic of the influence of the job market, three organizations have referred to it and have indicated its consequences in the domain of HRD. Because of the fact that the University of Twente has a surplus of employees in relation to the available jobs and the costs that are brought about by this, the University has started to pay attention to retraining and job market preparation programs. Next to a mobility center that has been established with the aim of enlarging one's knowledge and skills, outplacement programs have been developed.

In the Martini hospital, on the contrary, one has great difficulties to find qualified personnel. Part of the problem is due to the minor interest in health service jobs, but also the geographical location (in the North of the Netherlands). Aside from that, new strict laws concerning times to rest and recovery for health professionals have exaggerated occupational problems. Moreover, the dejuvenization and the aging of the working population necessitate paying attention to the implications of the increasing workload for the elderly. This urge the ARBO-dienst (services of conditions of employment) and the department of Training and Development to put the topic of the guidance of mobility and employability, and the ways this can be reached, high on the agenda. Similarly, the AAVN (General Employers' Association in the Netherlands) has made the topic of the guidance of employability to be the central point of attention. More emphasis on the individual career development and a broader definition of training goals are elevated into the key points of attention.

Comparing the developments mentioned in the theoretical outline one can conclude that participants do stress the same three main factors lying behind the current developments, i.e. economy, technology, and labor market. Although the outline also describes developments in the area of legislation, vocational education, or social-cultural developments, the participants did not mention about these particular developments. This does not imply that these latter types of developments do not occur, but that they are regarded of minor importance in affecting the HRD field.

Developments inside Working Organizations

As indicated in the corresponding section in the theoretical outlines, many organizations are forced to re-orientate on their organizational goals and to reconsider their present organization of jobs. Representatives from Generali Assurances, Canisius Hospital, Hoogovens and Connexion give accompanying examples.

For Generali Assurances, the change towards a customer-oriented organization has led to a centralization of the output norms, i.e. customer satisfaction and cost awareness. Especially the focus on customer awareness has implied an enormous increase in training costs. At the Canisius hospital, the focus of customer satisfaction has led to multidisciplinary tasks for the medical staff. The department of training and education has been outsourced to the

ARBO-dienst (service of conditions of employment). Besides, a reorganization leading to a flattening of the organization has led to new HRD questions. Interdisciplinary team work for professionals and delegating management skills being two examples. In this hospital, competence management, broadening of tasks and learning strategies are key issues in current personnel management tasks.

At Hoogovens, a reorganization has led to the introduction of business units with their own responsibilities, and that are delegated to the line management, in order to upgrade the professional expertise of each individual employee. A problem one encounters is the lack of an overview of developments in the specific professional domains and in the training programs that are given. In order to enable the HRD function to facilitate business management in the different units, one should have more insight into the specific requirements in the jobs of the professionals in each business unit.

Connexion, a transport company, which is the result of a fusion, concentrates on management development and education management in consideration of the guidance of competencies and in order to respond to the need for performance enhancement. Previously used job descriptions and performance evaluations are currently substituted by elaborated reports on systematically determining and developing competencies.

The perspective of the 'learning organization' forms the basis of the management philosophy of Gamma Holding, a textile industry company. Its philosophy is based on three conditions, i.e. delivering a high quality, using advanced technology and applying cunning logistics. In the Netherlands, Gamma Holding employs 2200 people, world-wide 10.000. A recent reorganization implied a change from a labor-intensive to a capital-intensive company meaning a change in range of products as well. At the moment one can characterize the company as process-driven and results-oriented, with a lot of investments in its innovative and technological capacities. Team building is used as a means to consciousness-raising for the philosophy of the learning organization. Competence management is one of the building pillars in this sense.

As far as the subject of commitment is concerned, a clarifying example can be found in the AKZO strategy where one, in order to enhance the individual commitment, puts a lot of energy in formulating norms and values people can identify with. Also at Connexion one tries to establish longer term working relationships by investigating which factors are highly valuable for people. For Hollandse Signaal Apparaten, on the other hand, commitment is not conceived to be a problem. The representative reports relatively long terms of duration of the employees within the company.

Comparing these examples with the theoretical outline, it is obvious that theory and practice both stress structural as well as cultural changes taking place within work organizations in order to attain organizational goals as well as to improve the level of performance.

Developments within the Domain of HRD

Apparently, in the outlines that are given up to now, one can detect a change in main strategy that can be characterized by means of a transition from 'education-minded' towards 'life-long learning-minded'. Many learning processes are founded on the need to enlarge one's employability. For example, the Rabobank (a Dutch banking organization) academy has formulated as its aim; the transition from lifetime employment towards life-long employability. Besides, the representative reports that more and more attention is paid to working in multidisciplinary teams, guiding one's own career, taking initiatives and pro-active thinking and acting.

The Dutch Railways has established a mobility center that both supports employees and prevents career problems. Each employee is enabled to have a career advice every three years. The Academic Hospital in Utrecht, nowadays, pays more attention to Human Resource Management activities because of the fact that there is too much outflow of personnel. Firstly, more training and education possibilities have been created. Secondly, a job satisfaction survey has been done and finally, measures to enlarge the amount of job satisfaction have been undertaken.

In all examples mentioned before one can detect a trend in which the responsibility for HRM activities are laid down with the line management. More and more HRD specialists act as advising partners (see for example at Start, an employment agency in the Netherlands). Training and education are more than ever outsourced while the existing departments of training and education are used especially for management development trajectories (see for example the so-called Business School at the AAVN (General Employers' Association in the Netherlands).

At Vredestein, the HRD managers take care of signaling new developments, trying to find possibilities in the job market, formulating strategic plans and so on, while in the past they mostly spent a lot of time taking care of all training and education activities.

As far as competence management is concerned, the representative of PriceWaterhouseCoopers mentioned the birth of new jobs in the field, like knowledge managers, electronic learning experts and information technologists.

All these jobs are aimed at building up knowledge and skills bases in individual employees throughout the organization and in an on-going sense, i.e. during the entire career.

In comparison with the theoretical outline, a first impression of the developments mentioned by practitioners is that they resemble the developments determined theoretically to a large extent. However, a shift in the way learning processes are organized, as predicted in theory, can hardly be recognized in practice. Although the need for this shift is recognized in practice, examples of other ways of organizing learning are hardly given. This may lead us to conclude that the undertaken activities are not in line yet with the ideas and wishes in this respect.

Conclusions including Contribution to New Knowledge in HRD

The confrontation between theory and practice that was deliberately staged in the working conferences appeared to be fruitful as it yielded some new insights to our theoretical views. Firstly, a diversity of working organizations largely recognizes the developments as described in literature to a certain extent. So, the outline appears to be suitable to describe and further analyze HRD developments. Nevertheless, all experts agreed that it only suits large organizations or multinationals, and that it does not apply to small and medium sized enterprises as well as to non-governmental organizations. It was also remarked that the outline should pay more attention to international developments, as a lot of organizations will face an increasing globalization and internationalization.

Secondly, although the experts recognized and consolidated a lot of different developments, it became clear that not all developments are of equal importance within specific organizations in the same time period. Organizations do face several challenges, which may be provoked by developments as described, but precise implications of different developments vary from organization to organization. As illustrated one specific development can lead to a large variety of different consequences, dependent on the context and the extent to which other developments apply. This is partly due to the fact that many of the developments are intertwined, so that it is not easy at all to differentiate between the developments that have been outlined.

Thirdly, we also have to conclude that almost all HRD developments derive from developments both inside as well as outside organizations because of the fact that HRD activities and goals do change as a result of these developments. Consequently, developments regarding the HRD-domain hardly arise from the domain itself, as the domain is mostly reactive to outside changes and to new demands and challenges. What makes it even more complex is that responses of the HRD-domain seem to vary according to the specific situation of the organization. As the results reveal, every organization takes other measures to cope with new developments. Actually, this is in line with other reviews of HRD developments and functions which apply also outside the Netherlands (Baets & Van der Linden, 2000; OECD, 2000; Garavan et al., 1999; Willmore, 1999).

Thus, similar developments going on outside organizations do influence HRD and HRD responses within organizations, but they do not automatically lead to the same types of responses (Poell & Van der Krogt, 2001). Obviously, processes and dynamics within organizations seem to play a major role in determining these responses. Understanding these processes and dynamics may be a new topic in HRD research that will deliver worthwhile insights to better understand HRD practices.

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