2 Learning organisations and HRD

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This chapter outlines the main theoretical concepts underlying this study. The chapter starts with a reflection on the need for organisational learning and an exploration of the concepts of the learning organisation and the learning-oriented organisation ('Lifelong learning, organisational learning and learning-oriented organisations'). Then there is a discussion of the theoretical basis on the changing role of the Human Resource Development function as a consequence of the concept of the learning organisation ('Human resource development in learning-oriented organisations'). As this book has a specific European outlook, the question is also posed as to whether the approach to HRD within Europe differs from that in the US and Japan (A European outlook on HRD? Comparison with US and Japan').

Lifelong learning, organisational learning and learning-oriented organisations

Currently, lifelong learning is an important topic on the European agenda. The idea of learning throughout the whole lifespan is not new. The notion has already been in the spotlights during the 1970s, when concepts such as 'lifelong learning', 'recurrent education' and '*education permanente*', were coined. During the 1980s, the discussion was continued on a smaller scale. Recently, the theme of lifelong learning has gained renewed attention (Brandsma, 1997). The most visible manifestation of this attention is the fact that the year 1996 was proclaimed as the official European Year of Lifelong Learning. This has rekindled previous discussions and instigated a new flood of publications, conferences and public debates.

Lifelong learning and the development of a learning society

Lifelong learning is defined by Brandsma (1997: 10) as:

- a process of personal development from employed and unemployed people that takes place continuously;
- a process that can contain both informal and formal activities;

- a process that makes demands upon structures in which lifelong learning takes place/can take place in creating the conditions that facilitate learning and learning to learn.

Lifelong learning is a process with many objectives, which the OECD describes as follows:

It is geared to serve several objectives: to foster personal development, including the use of time outside work (including in retirement); to strengthen democratic values; to cultivate community life; to maintain social cohesion; and to promote innovation, productivity and economic growth.

(OECD, 1996: 15)

The significance of lifelong learning gives rise to the need to develop a so-called learning society, which provides an infrastructure that supports learning throughout the whole lifespan. A learning society refers to mobilisation of not only the public education and training systems, but of all sectors in society, such as public authorities and individuals in creating opportunities for learning (Gass, 1996). Companies also play an important role in creating a learning society, as work grows to become an important source of learning (Pawlowsky and Bäumer, 1996). To an increasing degree, organisations deliberately set out to create learning opportunities for employees, believing that they need 'learning individuals' in order to realise 'organisational learning'.

Organisational learning

Current business realities of many European organisations place ever more demands on their ability to respond quickly and adequately to changes in their environments, by improving existing products and services or by innovation (Carnevale, 1992; Nonaka, 1991). As a result of the ever-increasing rate of (technological) change – induced by developments such as globalisation and the current 'explosion of knowledge' – organisational capacity for learning was pinpointed as the key ability for organisations in the 1990s, and beyond. New managerial concepts such as the learning organisation (Senge, 1990), the intelligent organisation (Pinchot and Pinchot, 1994; Quinn, 1994), the knowledge-creating company (Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995) and knowledge management (Drucker, 1995; Leonard-Barton, 1995; Pawlowsky and Bäumer, 1996) reflect the search for ways to improve organisational capacity for learning.

There are several classifications of organisational learning processes (e.g. Fiol and Lyles, 1985; Bomers, 1990; Pascale, 1990; Swieringa and Wierdsma, 1992), practically all of which are based on the typology of Argyris and Schön (1978). This typology distinguishes between two types of learning: single loop and double loop learning. Figure 2.1 (Argyris, 1992) depicts both processes.

An organisation's governing variables are, for example, its mission statement, and its (tacitly held) assumptions on the best way in which to achieve the organisational

goals. Organisations undertake actions based on these governing variables. These actions have certain consequences. Here, Figure 2.1 distinguishes between two possibilities. On the one hand, the results can be as expected, in which case there is a match between the intended outcome and the actual outcome. On the other hand, it is possible that the results of an action are not what the organisation had expected, in which case there is a mismatch between expectations and outcome.

Single loop, double loop and deutero-learning

In the theory of Argyris and Schön (1978) such a mismatch is the starting point for an organisational learning process. The organisation has to find out how to change its actions in order to achieve the intended outcome. This learning process can occur at two levels. First the level of single loop learning: this means the organisation makes small adjustments in its actions, but doesn't radically change them. To take a simplified example: imagine a chef who discovers hotel guests find the cake he just baked is too sweet. The next time the chef bakes a cake, he adds a little less sugar to the mixture than in the original recipe. In an organisational context a renewed version of a known product is a good example of an outcome of a single loop learning process.

However, making small adjustments at the action level is not always enough to solve the problem. Sometimes the reason for the mismatch is located at a deeper level: the organisation's governing variables. Then a double loop learning process is required in order to reach the intended outcome. To return to the example of the hotel chef: suppose he finds out the guests don't like sweet cake at all, but would prefer some savoury dish instead. In this case he discovers that one of his basic assumptions – that guests like sweet cake – is not accurate and needs adjustment. Instead of simply changing his cake recipe, he now has to seek an entirely new dish to make (and an entirely new recipe). In the case of organisational learning the outcome of a double loop learning process could be, for example, the introduction of a completely new product, or introducing an existing product in a totally new market.

Double loop learning processes thus have much more far-reaching consequences than single loop learning processes do. To illustrate this point, single loop learning is
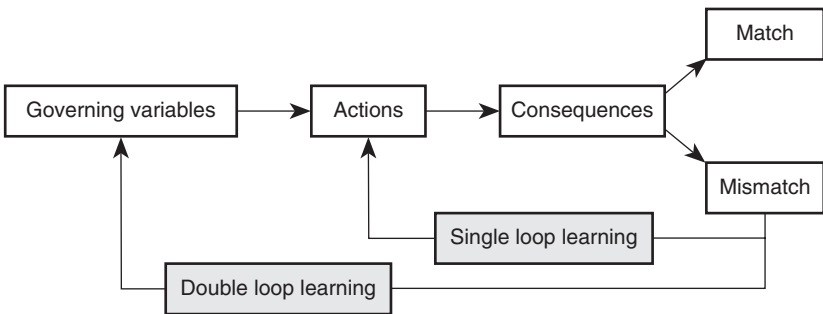

Figure 2.1 Single loop and double loop learning

often compared to keeping a ship on course by making small adjustments (Morgan, 1990), whereas double loop learning resembles the process of changing a ship's course. Single loop learning leads to incremental changes in organisational functioning, whereas double loop learning results in renewal or innovation of existing practices, services or products. Therefore, both kinds of learning processes add to each other. Imai (1986) drew up Figure 2.2 to illustrate the supplementary character of both types of learning processes.

Next to the processes of single loop and double loop learning Argyris and Schön (1978) have determined a third level of organisational learning, which they labelled 'deutero-learning'. This refers to the capacity of organisations of learning how to carry out, and how to optimise, their (single and double loop) learning processes. In other words, it refers to 'learning how to learn' (Senge, 1990; Swieringa and Wierdsma, 1992).

Organisational and employee learning

An organisation as such is an abstract notion, and so is its learning capacity. The ability of an organisation to learn is embodied in its employees. Employee learning thus is a necessary prerequisite for organisational learning (Kim, 1993).

For learning at an organisational level, organisations depend on the learning of their employees. In a sense employees embody an organisation's capacity for learning, since they embody the capacity to:

* acquire or create new knowledge for the organisation (e.g. by learning from daily work experiences, studying new technological advancements or learning about work practices used by other companies);
* disseminate this knowledge to others within the organisation;
* apply the new knowledge in improved or renewed work practices, products and services.1

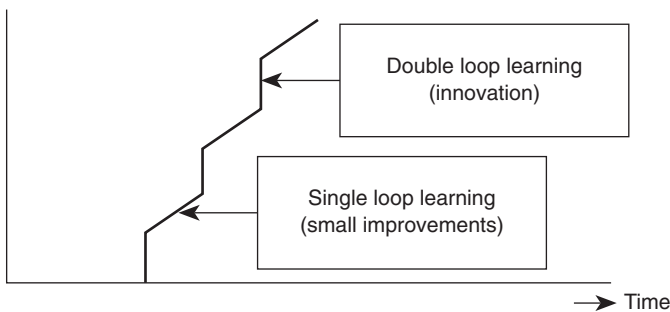In this respect, Honold describes a learning organisation as:

Figure 2.2 The relationship between single loop and double loop learning

one whose members are continuously deliberately learning new things. They apply what they learn to improve the product or service quality, the processes involved in making the product or providing the service, the quality of the environment in which employees work and the performance of members of the organisation.

(Honold, 1991: 56)

However, employee learning in itself is not enough to ensure learning at an organisational level. In order for an organisation to learn, employee learning should not be limited to individual learning. Adequate (bottom-up) communication is important in this respect, and a certain amount of empowerment of employees within the operational core. The first allows learning experiences from employees at different organisational levels to be transferred to other levels. The latter creates opportunities for employees to use their learning experiences in order to make improvements in the workplace (Pascale, 1990; Senge, 1990).

Learning organisations and learning-oriented organisations

The high current rate of change in the economic and technological environment of many organisations has given rise to the development of a new managerial concept: that of the learning organisation. This concept provides general ideas on how to design and manage organisations in order to survive in a highly changing environment.

Learning organisations

A learning organisation can, in simple terms, be described as an organisation that:

1 responds to (and anticipates) changes in its environment by learning on a strategic level (by single loop and double loop learning); moreover, it deliberately aims at improving its ability for learning (deutero-learning); and
2 in order to learn on a strategic level, makes use of the learning of all employees, therefore this employee learning is enhanced at all hierarchical levels.

In addressing the first point, one of the most distinguishing features of 'a learning organisation' is that it operates in an environment marked by a high rate of change. A learning organisation *accepts both this environmental turbulence and the fact that it cannot predict which changes will occur*. In the words of Pedler, Boydell and Burgoyne (1991): a learning organisation is marked by an acceptance that things don't stay the same for long.

Though this may seem a trivial matter, this attitude differs considerably from the tacit assumption most organisations hold – that the environment will not change profoundly and certainly not in a way that cannot be predicted. Seen in this light, the acceptance of change as a part of everyday organisational reality means a notably different strategic outlook from more traditional organisational models.

As a consequence of this acceptance of change, a learning organisation does not work according to a long-term detailed strategic plan. Instead, it has one overriding clear goal (often referred to as the organisational 'mission'), which serves as a general guiding principle for the course the organisation takes. It does not set out a specific 'route' by which it wants to reach this goal. In other words: a learning organisation knows where it wants to go, but does not plan in advance exactly how to get there.

Swieringa and Wierdsma (1992) use the metaphor of the 'traveller' and the 'tourist' to describe this attitude of a learning organisation with regard to strategic planning. The tourist typically travels according to a meticulously-planned schedule, in which every step of the journey is laid down in advance, whereas the traveller only has a broad idea of where he wants to go, and determines the exact route along the way. In doing so, he reacts to unforeseen circumstances. For example, if the weather is particularly nice in one location, he may decide to spend a few days extra there.

A learning organisation can be compared to a traveller. It knows where it wants to go (the 'mission') but plans how to get there step-by-step, constantly responding to changing circumstances. A clear picture of where the organisation wants to be in the long run, is indispensable. Without that, the company can easily lose its sense of direction as a result of the many incremental changes that are being made (Morgan, 1990; Senge, 1990).

Operating as a 'traveller' means there is a constant demand on the ability of the organisation to learn how to anticipate to changes and respond to unexpected situations in such a way that it can still reach its final goal. Thus, the organisation's capacity for learning becomes vital to its continued existence. That is, in short, the main reason why a learning organisation strives to continuously enhance its learning abilities at every level, in order to be able to react quickly and adequately to changes that might occur (Ansoff, 1987; Bomers, 1990; de Geus, 1988). A learning organisation is primarily an organisation that is capable of enhancing its own abilities for learning, it is capable of learning to learn (Senge, 1990; Swieringa and Wierdsma, 1992).

The second element in the definition above concerns *the role of employees.* As was mentioned earlier, for learning at a strategic, or organisational, level, organisations depend on employee learning, where employees embody the capacity to:

• acquire or create new knowledge for the organisation (e.g. by learning from daily work experiences, studying new technological advancements or learning about work practices used by other companies);
• disseminate this knowledge to others within the organisation;
• apply the new knowledge in improved or renewed work practices, products and services.

This notion affects the view of the added value which employees have for an organisation. Metaphorically speaking, the idea of the employee as a 'hired hand' makes way for the idea of the employee as a 'hired head'. Organisations need their employees to learn, in the sense of acquiring new knowledge and skills and using these to improve existing work practices, products or services, or to jumpstart innovation. Learning, therefore, becomes part of everyday work. As Sugarman describes it:

in place of the old model, which was first learning, then work, we now have the new model: first learning, then work-which-includes-continuous-learning. We are not just learning to do the work better; we are building the organisation's knowledge base and revising its tools, processes and products, as we work.

(Sugarman, 1998: 65)

And as this is the case, and employee learning takes on a strategic meaning for organisations, organisations seek ways to facilitate employee learning on an on-going basis (see, for example, McGill and Slocum, 1994; Winslow and Bramer, 1994). This can be achieved, for example, by managers acting not as a boss but as a 'coach', or by creating rich jobs that trigger learning.

This description does no more than provide a general image of what a learning organisation is. It doesn't present a clear, tangible picture of such a company. This is mainly due to the fact that the concept of the learning organisation is not an organisational model in the sense of a blueprint. The concept is more adequately described as a metaphor or an ideal type (see, for example, Leys, Wijgaerts and Hancké, 1992), a way of looking at organisations whereby the process of organisational learning, and not the primary work process is at the centre of attention. This makes it very difficult to assess whether or not an organisation is a 'learning organisation'. Consequently, there is little insight into the number of companies that can be labelled as such. However, it is clear that the management concept has gained a strong foothold. A considerable number of companies are experimenting with (parts of) the idea of the learning organisation. A logical starting point is the enhancement of employee learning.

Learning oriented organisations

Organisations which focus on creating opportunities for employee learning, with the long-term goal of becoming a learning organisation, can be labelled 'learning oriented organisations' (a term coined by Leys, Wijgaerts and Hancké 1992), organisations which:

- create (on-the-job as well as off-the-job) facilities for employee learning;
- stimulate employees not only to attain new knowledge and skills, but also to acquire skills in the field of learning and problem-solving and thus develop their capacity for future learning ('learning to learn').

Tjepkema and Wognum, 1996

The number of these so-called learning-oriented organisations is as yet unknown, but given the popularity of management concepts such as the learning organisation, the intelligent organisation and knowledge management, the group could already be quite large. In any case, the number in general is estimated to be growing rapidly.One could say that becoming a learning-oriented organisation is the first stage in the growth process towards a learning organisation. Becoming a learning organisation requires changes in organisational structures (e.g. process-oriented structure instead of functional, the introduction of teams), culture (e.g. learning culture) and management styles (e.g. from hierarchical styles towards a coaching style). Becoming a learningoriented organisation, means making the first steps towards these changes.

Especially in larger organisations, with a higher degree of specialisation, the HRD function traditionally plays an important role in employee learning. Its role changes considerably when their organisation becomes a learning-oriented organisation, intent upon stimulating and supporting employee learning on a continuous basis. In the next section this changing role of HRD is discussed.

Human resource development in learning-oriented organisations

As organisations develop into learning-oriented organisations, this has a profound impact on the relationship between work and learning. Whereas learning used to be primarily equalled to training, it now becomes predominantly associated with learning from experience, and self-directed learning. Similarly, learning is no longer regarded as a classroom activity, but primarily as something that takes place on-the-job as a continuous, on-going activity. On the one hand this changing view of learning has far-reaching consequences for line management, which is expected to manage the workplace as a place fit for learning (for instance by fostering a learning climate, and by coaching employees). On the other hand it considerably affects the role and tasks of human resource development (HRD) professionals, who are involved in the delivery of training activities for the organisation.

A new role for HRD

Since concepts such as knowledge management and the learning organisation are primarily managerial concepts, there is a considerable amount of literature with practical guidelines on the new role of line management as a leader, a facilitator of learning processes and a coach (e.g. Senge *et al.*, 1994; van den Broeck, 1994). The role of HRD in this process, however, receives much less attention in the leading management literature on organisational learning. Yet, it is becoming the theme of a growing number of publications in the (more specialised) field of HRD.

The role generally attributed to HRD practitioners in these publications is that of *consultant* to line management on how to facilitate and stimulate employee learning in the workplace, and how to link this learning to organisational needs and goals. Their work field broadens considerably, and the word 'trainer' (as they are sometimes called) is therefore really no longer an adequate label for their function. The new role of HRD practitioners will be that of a strategic learning facilitator, performance consultant or even change agent (Laiken, 1993; McLagan, 1996; Watkins and Marsick, 1993; Onstenk, 1994; Pearn, Roderick and Mulrooney, 1995; Robinson and Robinson, 1995; Stahl, Nyhan and d'Ajola, 1993). In some organisations, HRD professionals operate as change agents, starting and supporting the change process towards a learning organisation. Of course, such proactive HRD practitioners fulfil a different role from HRD professionals in companies where management has the leading role in the change process, and where HRD is a more reactive function. In general, the field of HRD seems to be moving from a reactive, isolated business function to a more strategic factor in today's companies (Garavan, Heraty and Barnick, 1999; Barham and Rassam, 1989).

Though the empirical basis for the new role of HRD departments is still very limited, some general working principles have been established, which reflect HRD departments' visions on their own new role in learning-oriented organisations and their tasks. The description below is based on a study of literature on HRD and organisational learning (Tjepkema, 1993a), and the findings of two small Dutch studies (using the case study approach) that were used to verify and add to the theoretical assumptions derived from that literature review (Tjepkema, 1993b; Tjepkema and Wognum, 1995). Both research projects entailed only six case studies, so the possibilities of generalising the findings are very limited. But the results did provide the conceptual framework for the current study.

General vision of HRD in learning-oriented organisations

Generally, HRD functions in learning-oriented organisations appear to focus deliberately on the broader field of learning instead of on training (which is but one form of learning). One of the first priorities of training departments that deliberately choose to aim towards 'facilitating learning' instead of 'delivering training', is to change their name in order to reflect this new vision. Thus, the 'training department' changes into, for instance, the 'centre for organisational learning and change' or the 'learning and development centre'. It is also common for these departments to (partly or completely) abolish the departmental structure, and place (some of the) HRD officers in the line organisation. Thus, an HRD 'department' in a learning organisation may look completely different from a training department in the traditional sense. Note that in this report, the term HRD department is used to mean 'all HRD professionals in the organisation' (whether organised in a departmental structure or not). The term HRD function is also used in a similar manner.

The vision of HRD departments in learning-oriented organisations regarding their own role can be characterised by three basic principles. These three principles (focus on learning, learning as a shared responsibility and linking learning to work) are explained in the literature as well as by HRD departments working on the development towards becoming a learning organisation (see case study research by Tjepkema and Wognum, 1995).

Focus on 'learning' instead of training

Perhaps the most distinguishing working principle of HRD departments in learning-oriented organisations is the above-mentioned broadened view of their own area of work. It is not limited to training, but expanded to include facilitating and supporting other learning processes within the organisation, with the aim of contributing to meaningful organisational learning processes. In this respect, one HRD officer who participated in the study mentioned earlier, stated: 'organising courses is not our main goal, our main goal is to support and facilitate organisational learning'. As a result, the HRD department not only fosters formal learning, but also strives to enhance informal and even incidental learning. In addition, the department not only focuses on individual learning, but also aims to facilitate the collective learning of

groups and organisational learning (see also Stewart, 1996). This working principle leads to a broadened range of interventions provided by the HRD department. Moreover, the purpose of these HRD interventions changes. The interventions are specifically aimed not only at gaining new qualifications, but also towards enhancing the learning capacity of employees.

Learning as a shared responsibility

The second working principle is that 'learning' is a shared responsibility of management, employees and the HRD department. The HRD department regards its own role in this respect as primarily supportive (e.g. the role of consultant). This implies a shift away from the, often implicit, idea that is, or used to be, typical for most organisations, namely that training is primarily the responsibility of the training department (see e.g. Barham and Rassam, 1989). Employee responsibility for learning and training has two aspects. On the one hand, employees are increasingly held responsible for managing their own learning processes. They are expected to regard working and learning as inseparable processes, and view themselves as 'continuous learners' (Watkins and Marsick, 1993). This means they have to ensure they keep up with the latest developments in their profession, and deliberately look for opportunities to make improvements in the workplace. On the other hand, employees also have a responsibility towards the learning of their colleagues. Increasingly, employees operate as teachers and mentors in formal and informal learning processes. The aim here is to stimulate the transfer and sharing of knowledge within the organisation.

Linking learning and working

Third, the processes of learning and working are considered to be very much intertwined. The employee is both a 'working learner' and a 'learning worker', where learning is regarded as a normal part of everyday work and working is seen as a rich source for learning (see McGill and Slocum, 1994). There is even a new term for employees which reflects this close connection between working and learning: the knowledge worker, people who possess relevant knowledge and apply this in order to improve processes, products and services (Kessels, 1995; Keursten, 1995; Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995).

On-the-job learning is stimulated as much as possible. This does not mean, however, that there is no room for off-the-job training activities. These will remain important, because in some instances they are the most suitable method for acquiring new knowledge and skills. However, they are no longer the dominant way of organising learning processes. They fulfil a supportive role with regard to the learning (and training) which takes place on the job.

Tasks of HRD professionals

As training, and the support of employee learning in general, is becoming regarded as a joint task of line management, employees and HRD professionals, the tasks of HRD

professionals change. On the one hand, a change of focus occurs in the way in which the HRD professional carries out his or her more traditional roles, such as the role of trainer, because of changes in the nature of training programmes (e.g. the focus on self-directed learning and on establishing close links between training and working; see: 'HRD interventions'). On the other hand, this joint responsibility for HRD brings some new tasks for HRD professionals. In ever more cases the actual (formal or informal) training and development activities are being carried out by line management and employees, whereas the HRD officers monitor the quality of these HRD activities and provide assistance and advice from a professional point of view whenever necessary. In other words, different HRD roles (consultant, trainer, needs analyst, …) are performed by different people (HRD specialists, managers, employees, …).

Basically, case study research indicates that the two tasks which can be considered to be most 'novel' for HRD professionals in companies which strive to become learning organisations, seem to be: consulting non-HRD professionals (such as line management, subject matter experts and other employees) on HRD specific matters and quality control tasks with regard to training activities carried out by line management and/or employees (Tjepkema and Wognum, 1995).

HRD interventions

'Facilitating employee learning' in the broadest sense is the overriding concern of HRD departments in learning oriented organisations. As such, this leads to a broadened range of interventions provided by the HRD department. The focus is on informal learning, and training activities are no longer HRD's main 'product'. Also, as already noted, the purpose of HRD interventions changes.

The interventions are aimed not only at gaining new qualifications, but also towards enhancing the learning capacities of employees. 'Development' activities (which are less formalised than training) particularly increase in number. Traditionally training, concrete and measurable learning goals are formulated, preferably in behavioural terms. The training is conducted, following a detailed plan, based on a careful analysis of the training need. By contrast, development activities are marked by more open-ended and roughly defined goals. The learners themselves carry the responsibility of reaching these goals, the 'trainer' merely performs the role of mentor, coach or facilitator. He guides the learning process, but doesn't completely control or design it. There is also no detailed structure, in which to fit the learning activities, only a rough outline. The activities are planned along the way. For this reason, these develop-ment activities are also known as semistructured training. Examples of development activities are: action learning projects, work meetings in which employees communicate some of their knowledge to their peers (e.g. the results of a project they have been working on) or work with an experienced colleague in another department for a while (as a form of internal apprenticeship).

Though training is only one of the offered activities, it remains an important one. In many cases training remains the most suitable approach for the transfer of knowledge and the teaching of certain skills. The training methods change, however. The trainee will take a more active role toward his own learning and training. The trainer explicitly

teaches trainees how to learn, and how to shape their own learning activities. This may foster a general learning attitude. Also, training and work are more closely linked, not only by creating more on-the-job training, but also by using real-life problems in training activities (or simulating them). In this way, the transfer of learning is better protected.

In addition to these changes in the nature of HRD interventions, attention is being paid to fostering learning on the job in general, by creating a work environment favourable for learning. Examples of conditions which facilitate learning (and on which the HRD department can exert influence) are: creating a mentor system, job rotation, organising meetings between employees with similar expertise who work in different parts of the organisation, providing materials for self study – for instance in an Open Learning Centre – or providing job aids. However, the most important condition for learning in the workplace – a stimulating work environment, (with a healthy learning climate, for example) – remains mainly the responsibility of line management. HRD professionals can provide advice and assistance to line management in this respect. This brief sketch of HRD's vision, roles and HRD activities served as the vantage point for this study.

A European outlook on HRD? Comparison with US and Japan

The results from this study (see the following chapters) indicate that few differences exist between each of the countries participating in this study. There was no evidence of significant differences between HRD in Finland and in France, for instance, or between Germany and Italy. Whilst some differences were found, there were more similarities. At first sight, this might seem strange. An instinctive response to the question as to whether there are differences in HRD within Europe would be: 'Of course there are'. Not only do business contexts vary, but differences in national histories, cultures and traditions have led to different national jurisdictions and regulations in countries. The variation becomes apparent in cross-European diversity in areas such as rights to educational leave, differences in training taxes, fiscal deductibility of training costs, relationships between (vocational) education and HRD, and differences in school-to-work transition practices. However, when looking at the major theme of this study, HRD in the learning-oriented organisation, and especially HRD visions, similarities appear to be greater than the cross-European differences.

But is this to say that there is a specific European outlook on HRD in the context of the learning organisation? To shed some light on this issue, a review of literature on HRD in Japan and the US was conducted in an attempt to compare HRD views in those countries with those encountered in this European study2 (ter Horst *et al.*, 1999).

It proved difficult to say whether Europe has its own specific outlook on HRD when compared to Japan or the US. Based on the literature review, similarities in outlook between Europe, Japan and the US appear more significant than the differences. This may be caused by the fact that within the European study, data collection was restricted to large organisations only (see Chapter three). Our impression is that the literature about HRD in Japan and the US is also predominantly based on large organisations. As

a result, the context of many organisations is comparable, as that is the global economy. If small- and medium-sized companies would be included in the study, the results might have been different, as many SMEs only work for regional or even local markets, which are more diverse in the sense that they operate in varying regional and local economies. Below, we'll look a little closer at the results of the literature study, comparing 'Europe' to the US and Japan (ter Horst *et al.*, 1999).

Concerning the general *HRD visions*, similarities outweigh differences between the US, Japan and Europe. This is also understandable, as important functions of HRD are to contribute to employee development, improving job performance, problem solving, organisational performance improvement, and career development. HRD departments in Europe as well as the US and Japan see themselves more and more as strategic partners. Supporting the business and contributing to achieving business goals are, to an increasing degree, highlighted as major HRD objectives.

Differences in approach can be found when considering the *roles of HRD professionals.* Both in Europe and the US this role, generally speaking, changes from trainer to consultant. Moreover, a more active role is expected from managers and employees. Managers are given more responsibility for employee learning and employees are expected to take responsibilities for their own development process. For HRD professionals, this means they will have to support them in doing so, in order to ensure quality of HRD interventions. Some of this support may consist of providing learning resources. This is in essence a rather *practical* role. Having managers fulfil an active role in HRD also gives HRD practitioners room to give advice (consult) on HRD issues, which can be considered to be a more *strategic* role, since it provides HRD professionals with the opportunity to help managers link training to corporate needs and to use opportunities for informal learning at work (instead of only training). It also provides them with room to work on other more strategic tasks such as monitoring competencies, helping managers in their new role, offering new HRD concepts and promoting learning.

In Japan, however, line management, and not the HRD function, is the major partner in employee development. The manager is fully responsible not only for employee development but also for creating a learning culture, for example. Just as in Europe and the US, Japanese employees are expected to take on an active role regarding their own development process. But it appears that this has been normal practice in Japan for a long time, and is not a new development.

An HRD function, as it exists in European and US companies, seems non-existent in Japan. Large organisations in Japan do have a training department, which merely focuses on providing training and/or training materials. But an HRD department with HRD professionals that also fulfil other tasks (rather than 'traditional' training tasks), such as supporting a learning culture, supporting knowledge management etc. seems to be very rare in Japanese organisations.

With regard to *HRD strategies*, most of the differences between US and European firms on the one hand, and Japanese businesses on the other, can be found with regard to HR approaches. First, forms of training appear to vary. In Japanese organisations *formal on-the-job training* (supplemented with informal learning on-the-job) is most common, whereas US and European companies tend to focus on *formal off-the-job*

training, in combination with *informal learning on-the-job*. The focus on formal learning-on-the-job in Japanese organisations can be explained by the major guiding concepts in this country, such as lifetime employment and seniority-based practices. Second, in Japan, a strong emphasis is placed on group processes. In contrast to this, in America the emphasis is on individuals. Europe can, in this respect, be characterised as focusing on both individual and group development.

It has to be said, that although we did compare 'Europe' as a whole to Japan and the US, these are in themselves nations within which the differences between companies are also large. So, the reflection on similarities and differences between Europe, Japan and the US, is based on an overall view, and based on (gross) generalisations about the situation in these nations. Of course there is no such thing as a European, US or Japanese HRD model, but it was an interesting exercise to compare HRD practices in these different countries, and although it has not yielded a 'European HRD profile', it has provided some extra background context against which to interpret the insights of this particular study, which was European in nature.

Notes

1   Together, these activities make up what is also known as a 'knowledge cycle', or 'organisational learning cycle' (Dixon, 1994; Pawlowsky and Bäumer, 1996)
2   Literature was searched in several databases on the basis of key words such as training, HRD, learning organisations, innovation and competitiveness in Japan and the USA. In addition to this, new literature was found in the lists of references of the respective publications ('snowball method'). Finding useful publications about HRD in Japan and the US proved to be not so easy. First of all, there is the language barrier when studying Japanese literature. Second, there is much literature about HRD in the respective nations, but not much that has been written about specific cases or is based on research. Third, much of the literature is not up-to-date. The literature used for this review was mainly restricted to descriptive and analytic publications about the position of HRD in the nations studied. The sources varied widely in quality. The emphasis was placed on referenced and high quality publications. Research literature was used whenever possible.