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Editorial

I have a saying posted above my desk which says “Anything worth doing is going to take longer than you think”. This first issue of The International Journal of HRD Practice Policy and Research has provided a perfect example! It has indeed been some time in gestation and I commend you to the short article by Bob Morton and Jim Stewart, in the HRD Viewpoint section, for a fuller account of how the partnership between IFTDO and UFHRD has finally brought the Journal to fruition. I want to focus in this editorial on the rationale for and the direction of the Journal. Let me begin with a short story of my own. I began my career in HR (or personnel management as it was then) with Cadburys, the world famous chocolate makers. An early posting was to the production night shift. Myself and another new graduate nervously attended our first production meeting before the shift commenced. Asked to introduce ourselves my colleague, perhaps naively in retrospect, chirped up with “I’m an Arts graduate from Bristol”. The production manager, a tough no-nonsense bloke, who’d worked at Cadburys since before I was born, nearly choked with laughter but managed to proclaim “So what are you going to do paint the bloody place?!” Over the years since I often find myself thinking about this. It seems to me to capture a tension between the worlds of academia and practice; a sense of competing realities combined with unease and nervousness about how a synergistic relationship might be realised. I sensed it repeatedly during my long career with Leeds Met University, teaching professional HRD students. I sensed their difficulty with theory, with research, yet at the same time saw in some of their assignment work valuable contributions to both theory and practice, which were destined to be read by no more than a handful of other academics. A very recent reminder of such questions occurred when listening to Aidan Lawrence, Learning & Development Director for Hewlett Packard, Ireland. He presented a passionate ‘business case’ for an enhanced relationship between HRD research and practice at a recent UFHRD Conference. Aidan argued the need for a strengthening of research practice collaboration, seeing academia and practice as strategic partners in practice-research-practice learning cycles.

The rationale for the Journal is firmly located in such a discourse yet clarity about the implications — what will it look like — will take time to emerge. One of my Editorial Board colleagues, Jamie Callahan, puts it nicely when she says we are “crafting a new language” because we have nothing that adequately addresses this ground. She suggests the tension I speak of above is best described as a continuum. A continuum from scholar, through to scholar-practitioner (scholar who practices), practitioner-scholar (practitioner who engages in scholarship), scholarly practitioner (practitioner who is interested in and uses scholarly work to inform their practice but doesn’t do the research themselves), and finally to practitioners. We have excellent journals that speak the language of the first two; and there are excellent trade journals that speak to the last one. We want to accomplish the challenging task of speaking to the middle three, while hoping to move more practitioners to become scholarly practitioners. This “crafting of a language” that speaks to those populations, Jamie notes “is work in progress ... and our first issue reflects that condition”.

Let me at this point introduce this first issue. Bob Hamlin’s passion for evidence based HRD is ably illustrated in the lead article. Indeed, I have described his contribution to others as an evidence based article about evidence based HRD! So, hopefully a good start in dispelling myths and doubts about the potential of academic practice partnerships in developing our understanding of HRD and its impact. Academic practice partnership is also a feature of the second article, where Jeff Gold explores how the leadership of organizations (one private sector one public) have sought to take a new and inclusive approach to the ‘old chestnut’ of culture change. The clue is use in the title of the
word “Re-connecting”. It is an account of practice which argues how leaders can ‘re-discover’ their organizations and use this as basis for learning to lead organizational change. The Journal is the international journal of HRD practice, policy and research. Erica Smith draws on her research with the International Labour Organization and a number of Australian companies to address policy principles in terms of managing apprenticeship. This serves as an excellent article in its own right but also one enables me to flag the importance we are placing on such policy reflections as a feature of the Journal. Whether principally ‘national HRD’ focused (skills, graduates, qualifications) or issues regarding ‘corporate HRD’ strategy both have important place in the Journal’s coverage. From Australia, the latter three articles take us to Oman, Saudi Arabia and then back to the UK. Paul Turner and Alison Glaister, together with their Omani colleague Rayya Al-Amri, focus on what must be one of the most talked about HRD practices in current times - talent management. In the context of Omanisation (a challenging HRD policy in its own right) the authors apply a talent management evolution matrix to assess practice in two key sectors of the Omani economy. Whether Roland Yeo and his colleagues are best described as ‘practitioner scholars’ or ‘scholar practitioners’ may be a debateable point. What is encouraging is that Saudi Aramco were happy for Roland and his colleagues to write up their work on team-based knowledge sharing in the business. Again, the clue to the value of their paper is in the sub-title: “Learning through complex work challenges”. The authors are ‘insider researchers’, tackling HRD processes that can unlock knowledge and understanding about work problems through team learning. The final article in this first issue takes us into world of the UKs national health service. Adam Turner, a practitioner within the NHS, and Lynn Nichol, his ‘academic’ partner explore development assessment centres. But, interestingly, their focus is the voice of the participant of such HRD interventions. The insights generated have challenging implications for HRD policy and practice.

An HRD Viewpoints section follows these substantive contributions. It is a space where we hope to encourage dialogue and debate about HRD, through a variety of shorter contributions. It might be a short practice review on how a new initiative has been developed / implemented; a view on a proposed or recently implemented national HRD policy or a reflection on the development of HRD as a function and/or a profession. In this first issue Sophie Mills and Amanda Lee look back on their — at times very challenging — research project on comparative global HRD practice. A final contribution asks tough questions about HRD’s role in a world of work dominated by robotics and automation.

A final word about the Editorial Board and the Editorial Advisory Board. The former is responsible for the overall management of the Journal, reporting to the Journal’s governing body on overall progress and development. The latter adds professional integrity and standing to the Journal and act as advisers to the Editorial Board on matters of Journal development, the two boards, together, represent an excellent cross section of HRD interest around the world. I thank them for their support to date and look forward to working with them as we ‘craft the language’ of the new Journal and seek to establish its credentials.

HRD is not going to stand still — it is a shifting landscape. The Journal has a role in reflecting how HRD is developing but also in influencing its development. Anyone who views him/herself as an HRD professional has a contribution to make to this Journal. So, I conclude with a warm invitation to all readers to help the Journal meet its aspirations.

Dr Rick Holden, Editor in Chief
Most HRD practitioners are, or wish to become, actively involved as strategic business partners of managers, particularly with respect to helping them bring about effective and beneficial organizational change within their own organizations, or within host organizations. This article discusses the complexities of HRD related process issues in the effective management of organizational change, and the value of using HRD-related theory, change management-related theory, and/or academically rigorous internal in-company research to help inform, shape, and evaluate the change agency practice of HRD professionals and the managers they partner. Following a discussion of why many organizational change programmes fail, the author argues that ‘evidence-based HRD’ geared to the strategic thrust of the business will likely lead to the HRD function maximizing its contribution to organizational effectiveness and sustainable business success. Two UK case examples of evidence-based HRD are presented, followed by a discussion of the worth of ‘professional partnership’ research and empirical generalization ‘replication’ research.

Introduction

This article has three aims. The first is to highlight the critical role that HRD practitioners could or should play as strategic business partners of managers in the management of organizational change (OC), and the concomitant necessity of robust change management enhancing research. The second is to present evidence supporting the case for HRD practitioners and managers to consider investing in context-specific OC-related research within their own organizations in order to improve their change-agency effectiveness; and to consider conducting such research in collaboration with academics within ‘professional partnership’ arrangements to ensure the rigour, robustness, and reliability of the findings. The third aim is to argue the case for empirical generalization ‘replication’ research that focuses on context-general OC-related field problems experienced in multiple specific organizational settings, and/or across organizational sectors and nations, in support of evidence-based HRD and evidence-based organizational change-agency practice. Stewart (2015) has argued that HRD practitioners are change agents who help and partner with managers in the facilitation of organizational change programmes within their own or host organizations. Together with other writers, Stewart claims that HRD is a strategic function that can have a significant impact on the long term business success of organizations (see Stewart and McGoldrick, 1996; Fredericks and Stewart, 1996). Furthermore, Gold, Holden, Iles, Stewart and Beardwell (2009) argue that HRD in practice and theory has a major influence on the interplay of leadership, culture, and employee commitment through: (i) helping to develop current and future leaders; (ii) involvement in shaping the organizational culture; (iii) building commitment among organization members; and (iv) anticipating required managerial responses to changing conditions. Similarly, McKenzie, Garavan and Carbery (2012) observed that “the shift from operational and tactical HRD to strategic HRD has witnessed a metamorphosis for HRD practitioners increasingly becoming partners in the business tasked with aligning people, strategy, and performance rather than simply promoting learning and development” (p.354). This observation echoes Kohut and Roth’s (2015) claim that “HRD practitioners and scholars need
to enter the fray of the discussion on change management” (p.231). Over the last three decades of the twentieth century, the need for managers to initiate and facilitate organizational change management programmes effectively and beneficially has continued to increase in frequency, pace, and complexity (see Hamlin, Keep and Ash, 2001). In this context a major challenge facing modern day HRD practitioners is how best to help their colleague managers in this endeavour. Unfortunately, many OC programmes fail because both managers and HRD professionals find themselves unable to rise to the challenge that change brings. Consistent with the three aims outlined above, this article addresses the problematic issue of bringing about strategic organizational change successfully. It does so by discussing and illustrating the contribution that good collaborative replication HRD research can make in support of HRD and organizational change agency practice. The specific purposes are as follows:

(i) To discuss the reasons why organizational change programmes fail.

(ii) To make the case that HRD practitioners and managers should become evidence-based in their organizational change agency practice.

(iii) To outline certain obstacles to ‘evidence-based HRD’, ‘evidence-based management’ and ‘evidence-based organizational change agency’.

(iv) To discuss how these obstacles may be overcome through HRD ‘professional partnership’ research and empirical generalization ‘replication’ research, respectively.

Why Do Organizational Change Programmes Fail?

The success rate of planned organizational change strategies over the past 30 years has been dismal with two thirds or more OC programmes having failed to achieve their intended aims (Burnes, 2004; Choi and Ruona, 2011; Szabla, 2007). This failure is surprising bearing in mind the plethora of advice and guidance on the ‘how to’ of change management. Most change management models on offer follow Lewin’s ‘unfreeze-move-refreeze’ process, and although they differ in varying ways, all include a common ‘step by step’ approach as depicted in a generic ‘composite’ model offered by the author (see Hamlin, 2001a; Hamlin, 2002). The model is comprised of six steps as follows:

Stage 1 Diagnose/explore the present state and identify the required future state.

Stage 2 Create a strategic vision.

Stage 3 Plan the change strategy.

Stage 4 Secure ownership, commitment and involvement including top management support.

Stage 5 Project manage the implementation of the change strategy and sustain momentum.

Stage 6 Stabilize, integrate and consolidate to ensure perpetuation of the change.

It is assumed that HRD practitioners and managers possess the requisite knowledge, attitude, and skills to apply the model effectively. However, according to Shook and Roth (2011) the failure rate of organizational change programmes is around 70% irrespective of whether they are driven by ‘mergers’, ‘acquisitions’, ‘downsizing’, ‘de-layering’, ‘IT’, ‘total quality management’,
‘business process re-engineering’, or ‘culture change’ initiatives, and this failure rate suggests they do not. Based on his review of organizational change management studies from various researchers in the US, the UK, and in various other European countries, the author identified over 15 years ago six underlying root causes or ‘failings’ of managers and HRD practitioners which explain in part why OC programmes fail (Hamlin, 2001a). Five of these failings relate to managers:

Failing 1 Managers not knowing the fundamental principles of change management.

Failing 2 Managers succumbing to the temptations of the ‘quick fix’ or ‘simple solution.

Failing 3 Managers not fully appreciating the significance of the leadership and cultural aspects of change.

Failing 4 Managers not appreciating sufficiently the significance of the people issues.

Failing 5 Managers not knowing the critical contribution that the HRD function can make to the management of change.

Failing 6 Trainers and developers lacking credibility in the eyes of line managers.

Regarding Failing 5, many managers regard training and development as an undesirable cost that can only be afforded when profits and/or funding are plentiful, rather than as an investment which the organization can ill-afford not to make even in the toughest of times, and especially during periods of transformational change. Yet if managers are to be in control of change they must ensure they are in control of the knowledge, attitude and skill issues associated with change itself. This means giving sufficient time and attention to the ‘soft’ people-oriented HRD aspects of the change management process. Regarding Failing 6, for decades many if not most HRD practitioners have lacked high ‘credibility’ with line managers. For some this has not been helped by being part of HR departments which have also lacked status due to: (i) the dominant focus on personnel administration, and (ii) line managers being frustrated by HR staff who show little understanding of business, are too rigid, and who invariably seem to say ‘no’ when managers need their help to find ways to make things work (Hamlin, 2001a; Cardillo, 2012). Thus, managers place low role expectations on most HR professionals (Thornhill, Lewis, Millmore, and Saunders; 2000; Ulrich, 1997), and by association also on HRD professionals. Additionally, this lack of credibility can be exacerbated in countries such as the USA where HRD-related postgraduate professional qualifications programmes offered by universities are predominantly delivered by Schools of Education, rather than by Schools of Business or Management as in the UK. In those countries HRD professionals are often perceived more as ‘adult educationalists’ or ‘specialized teachers’, rather than as ‘people and organization development consultants’. Consequently, it behoves HRD practitioners to concern themselves with the mainstream business and management of organizations if they are to maximize their contribution to organizational effectiveness and sustainable business success (see Stewart and Hamlin, 1990).

The way of achieving this is to engage in a change management process by: (i) conducting organization wide ‘health’ checks to identify required changes and the associated learning and development needs of managers and non managerial employees at the organizational, group, and individual level, (ii) providing ‘expert’ advice on how best to meet these needs; (iii) recommending or taking the requisite action, and/or responding to needs resulting from ‘top down’ OC initiatives; and (iv) developing the skills and abilities of managers to manage change
effectively and to cope effectively with any unintended consequences of the planned changes. However, much depends on the extent to which they can improve their ‘credibility’ in the eyes of line managers. Hence, HRD practitioners need to ‘sell’ their potential as valued strategic business partners of managers and in particular the distinctive contribution they can make in formulating and implementing organizational change programmes.

Evidence-Based HRD and Organizational Change

The notion that HRD is a strategic function and that HRD practitioners are agents of change who work in strategic business partnership with line managers is consistent with Phillips and Shaw’s (1989) call for trainers to develop into the roles of ‘training consultant’, ‘learning consultant’ and ‘organization change consultant’. However, as previously argued by the author, to become truly expert, HRD practitioners need to use the findings of high quality management-related and HRD-related research to inform, shape, and evaluate the effectiveness of their consultancy and change agency practice (Hamlin, 2001). The author and other writers have since reinforced this view by arguing that they need to reflect critically and become evidence-based (Hamlin, 2007; Holton, 2004; Kearns, 2014). Similarly, calls have been made for managers to enhance their professional practice by becoming research-informed and evidence-based (see Axelsson, 1998; Briner, Denyer and Rousseau, 2009; Latham, 2009, Pfeffer and Sutton, 2006; Rousseau, 2006, 2012; Stewart, 1998). Drawing upon evidence-based practice approaches in other fields, the types of ‘best evidence’ that could be used to support evidence-based human resource development could, and in the author’s view should, include: (i) Mode 1 research which is about testing theory and generating conceptual knowledge, (ii) Mode 2 research which is about generating instrumental knowledge to resolve real-life/work-based problems, and in some cases developing mid-range theory, and (iii) descriptive studies or the consensus view of a body of field experts. As in medicine, ‘best evidence’ does not need to be comprised solely of findings from positivist ‘normal science’ studies (Kuhn, 1996, p.5). Indeed, findings from any type of good quality research can be used, whether quantitative or qualitative. Such studies may be based either (i) on the paradigmatic assumptions, methodologies, and methods privileged by any one of the main research paradigms, namely: ‘Positivism/Functionalism’; ‘Post positivism/Radical structuralism’; ‘Critical-idealogical/Radical humanism’ and ‘Constructivism-interpretivism’, or (ii) on the philosophical assumptions associated with pragmatism and Morgan’s (2007) ‘pragmatic approach’ which allows the researcher to adopt whichever paradigmatic assumptions are considered best for achieving the research objectives (see also Hamlin, 2015). In addition, the on-going findings and insights on practice gained from action research can also be considered as a form of ‘best evidence’.

An important feature of evidence-based change agency is the notion of critical reflection. For the author, the significance of this notion was reinforced 15 years or so ago by the ‘reflections on practice’ case histories’ of 18 of his MSc in HRD and Organizational Change alumni, all of whom were HRD practitioners who, as part of their MSc programme at the University of Wolverhampton-UK, had helped managers within their own organization or in a host company to bring about effectively and beneficially an identified desired strategic organizational change (see Hamlin, Keep, and Ash, 2001). Some of them had incorporated action research as an integral component of the facilitated change management process. The insights gained from their respective ‘reflective case histories’ led the author to offer a definition for what he called ‘research-informed HRD’.
Research-informed HRD is the conscientious and explicit use of research findings and the research process to inform, shape, measure and evaluate professional practice (Hamlin, 2002: p.98).

That HRD practitioners and also the managers they help should become ‘critically reflective’ and ‘evidence-based’ is compelling, particularly bearing in mind the increasing paradoxes, contradictions, and complexities of organizational life which complicate the task of facilitating OC programmes efficiently and effectively (Hatton, 2001; Vince, 2014). This should involve taking action to (i) make sense of the organization and understand better what is going on; (ii) develop suitable OC strategies; (iii) implement these OC strategies effectively; (iv) critically evaluate the change process and its effectiveness; and (iv) draw lessons for the future by reflecting critically upon their individual practice as agents of change.

Some writers suggest the tasks associated with change management processes are usually obvious, and that there is nothing intellectually demanding or difficult about the management of organizational change (Rogers, Shannon, and Gent, 2003). However, people and organizations are far more complex than is often inferred from much of the change management literature. Furthermore, the many ‘solutions’ offered for resolving organizational change management ‘problems’ can be more difficult to comprehend and implement than is often claimed by ‘experts’. Hence, evidence-based HRD practitioners working with colleague managers would do well to use not only the generalized ‘conceptual knowledge for understanding’ that emerges from the findings of conventional Mode 1 research, but also to instigate and/or collaboratively conduct internal Mode 2 research in order to generate instrumental knowledge for action that has optimum relevance and utility. Engagement in good quality Mode 2 applied research is likely to lead to a better understanding of the particular complexities, contradictions, and paradoxes that may affect or are affecting the change management processes and the effectiveness of the change agency practice. They would also do well to consider building into their change management processes sufficient time for critical reflection. From such reflection new theoretical insights may emerge which can explain the success or failure of particular aspects of their OC programme. Informed by a critical review of their own change agency contribution, ‘new ways’ and ‘lay theories’ for approaching problems of change confronting them may also emerge. The practical significance of in-house Mode 2 research to solve context-specific work-based problems should not be underestimated.

In summary, HRD practitioners and managers who use good Mode 1 and/or Mode 2 research to inform, shape, and evaluate their change agency practices are more likely to be effective in bringing about beneficially planned organizational change that delivers the intended desired end-state outcomes, instead of the more usual undesired and/or unintended outcomes. However, a major obstacle to becoming evidence-based is the continuing sparseness of ‘best evidence’ that can be drawn upon to support evidence-based management and HRD practice.

**What Types of Research Are Useful in Support of Evidence-Based HRD and Organizational Change?**

The challenges of becoming an ‘evidence-based practitioner’ are discussed in this section, including the need to determine the types of research topics and approaches that are most likely to be of greatest utility to evidence-based HRD practitioners and line managers seeking to improve their change agency practice. Of importance to all organizational change agents is the need to understand in sufficient depth the people and organization related factors that need to
be improved and changed, including critical aspects of the prevailing organizational culture, management culture, and leadership that can either help or hinder the organizational change management process. The small body of existing ‘best evidence’ can provide valuable context-general knowledge to inform the formulation of a change strategy, regardless of the specificities of a particular organizational setting. For example, various researchers have explored ‘employee resistance to change’ (see Garcia-Cabrera, and Hernandez, 2014; Szabla, 2007) and ‘employee readiness for change’ (see Choi and Ruona, 2011); whilst others have explored the related issue of organizational dynamics that can impact positively or negatively on the organizational change process. For instance, Vince (2014) investigated the specific issues of emotion, power relations, and political dynamics which are factors that can enhance or inhibit learning and development, and thereby support or undermine the effectiveness of the planned OC programme.

Extant generalized knowledge can help only so far in identifying and understanding better the many paradoxes, contradictions and complexities that limit the success of so many OC programmes. Hence, HRD practitioners and managers should consider commissioning and/or conducting context-specific/case-specific internal research as part of their change agency. When conducted with academic rigour, such OC related research can lead to deep seated fundamental issues about the running of the organization being surfaced and confronted. Examples might include those ineffective aspects of managerial/organizational culture, or specific managerial and employee behaviour that impede or block innovation and change. The results of internal research projects that are recognized by people within the organization as being relevant, rigorous, and of a high ethical standard, are likely to ‘strike a chord’. As a result, both managers and non-managerial employees are more likely to accept the evidence of ineffective features of organizational life that impact negatively, or are likely to impact negatively, on the OC process, including their own individual performance or behavioural deficiencies. Additionally, they are more likely to advance personal opinions, reactions, and ‘theories’ that would otherwise not be revealed. This type of research can generate the ‘hard’ empirical evidence required to reveal and accurately reflect back to the organization the truth and realities of organizational life, and thereby help surface organizational taboos or latent and un-discussed sensitive issues that should be addressed (Bruce and Wyman, 1998; Pfeffer and Sutton, 2006). Engaging with and using such research can enable HRD practitioners and managers to become fully effective as evidence-based change agents.

**Overcoming the Obstacles to Evidence-Based HRD and Organizational Change**

As previously mentioned, there is a paucity of generalized HRD-related research that can unreservedly be translated and transferred to organizations, organizational sectors, or countries beyond the original location of the study. Therefore, until this deficiency of Mode 1 research-generated theory is rectified over time by HRD scholars, HRD practitioners and colleague managers wishing to operate as evidence-based change agents will, out of sheer necessity, have to instigate and/or engage with Mode 2 research within their own organizations. The results of such research can then be used to inform, shape and critically evaluate the way they practice as agents of change. As well as action research and also critical action learning which Vince (2008) and other writers advocate, the author has personally experienced the merits of ‘professional partnership’ research and empirical generalization ‘replication’ research. The relevance, utility, and value of both of these approaches to research are discussed and illustrated next.
Professional Partnership Research

According to Jacobs (1997) ‘professional partnership’ research is carried out between a university and a collaborating organization with scholars and practitioners jointly conducting programmes of research that are focused on work-based problems of concern to management. However, in doing so they operate with their own mutually exclusive yet complementary goals. Of critical importance is the need to maintain the integrity of both sets of goals for the common good. A dual goal at the very outset of the study is to strive to generate empirical evidence that can be used reliably to help bring about required change within the organization through the application of academically rigorous research, whilst at the same time generating new insights capable of advancing knowledge in the field of HRD and management. Depending upon the particular focus and purpose of the research, the results may be used to inform the OC programme design, and/or to evaluate it prior to a redesign that may be required at each iterative stage of the planned change management process until the desired end-state has been reached. The author has participated as the HRD scholar partner within several professional partnership research studies in various UK public, private, and third (non-profit) sector organizations. These were either instigated by him or the respective HRD practitioner partner. The results of all of these studies have been reported in various academic journals and/or at international research conferences held in Europe and North America. Each study generated instrumental knowledge that the respective HRD practitioner partners subsequently used directly or indirectly to inform and shape an HRD-related intervention, or to critically evaluate an aspect of HR or management policy and practice within their respective organizations. Two case examples of this type of collaborative inquiry are presented below to illustrate the nature and impact of ‘professional partnership’ research. The respective research focus and goal, and where the results of the study have been published, are described briefly. In addition, and in both cases, the practical relevance and impact of the research within the two respective collaborating organizations are illustrated though ‘testimonial evidence’ provided by the respective HRD practitioner partner or partners.

Case Testimonial 1

HM Customs and Excise: (Anglia Region)

This collaborative replication study of perceived managerial and leadership effectiveness was commissioned by the Collector (Executive Head Dick Shepherd) of the Anglia Region of HM Customs and Excise—a major department of the British Civil Service. The study was carried out jointly by the author and Dick Shepherd’s Research Officer (and OD Consultant) — Margaret Reidy who respectively acted as the HRD scholar and HRD practitioner in the partnership. The research took place from 1994 to 1998, during which period Margaret Reidy was also undertaking a parallel programme of qualitative ethnographic longitudinal doctoral research on cultural change. Details of this replicated managerial behaviour research, and the impact of applying the results in practice, have been published in several conference proceedings and academic journals (see Hamlin, Reidy, & Stewart, 1998; Hamlin, & Reidy, 2005).

Extract from Personal Testimonial of Dick Shepherd

I was accountable to the Board of Customs and Excise for achieving operational targets within the region. To cope with the demands for ever-increasing outputs and for more openness in our dealings with the public I needed to change the culture of the organization. I used seminars, walking the floor, publishing my Expectations document and was making progress and lifting
outputs. But I felt that I did not really know how deep the changes were penetrating — there was always an element of telling me what I wanted to hear in the feedback I was receiving. I commissioned the critical incident/factor analytic research [on managerial and leadership effectiveness] from Bob Hamlin at Wolverhampton University, [and it was] my initial hope to find the patterns of strengths and weaknesses among the managers and team leaders. The results exceeded my expectations for I felt I was getting the real behaviours and attitudes prevalent in all the various parts of the organization for the first time. I was able to use the emerging results very quickly at my annual management conference where it made a big impact. This was no consultant’s abstract interpretation using the latest business management technique. This was real. This was us. I had a profile of the attitudes and behaviours in the organization for the first time based on fact rather than intuition. A key factor right through this whole process was the close partnership between me and the research team. The clear understanding was that the research should be carried out independently with rigour and integrity to as high an academic quality as was necessary to provide provable results. My part was to commission it, facilitate its freedom in operation, and ensure that the [research process and] results were directly related to the working life of the Department. In fact the research team went on to develop a set of (management) competencies that we were able to use in our local appraisal system to improve managerial effectiveness. They also developed specifically targeted team building and managerial effectiveness workshops.

R.C. Shepherd

Date: 21 May 2002

Extract from Personal Testimonial of the HRD Practitioner Partner — Margaret Reidy

The data that resulted from the professional partnership-research “was so rich that its preliminary findings were immediately and effectively used by Dick Shepherd and me to inform and shape a number of OCD/HRD interventions for managing the (organizational) change, including workshops and local initiatives” … “The preliminary findings helped people to assess their behaviours and attitudes in newer and more in-depth ways”. This was invaluable to the everyday work of the organization as managers could effectively identify and curtail or harness those behaviours (associated with effective or ineffective management respectively). This was achieved with the support of [OD/HRD] tools developed from the research findings to improve the rapidly transforming organization. The finalized data took this further. As a direct result of the managerial [and leadership] effectiveness research, a new set of behavioural management competencies were developed exclusively for the organization” … “The findings of the overall research [i.e. the ethnographic ‘cultural change’ study and replication ‘managerial behaviour’ study], that were both positive and negative in terms of people’s attitudes and behaviours, were accepted in a highly positive manner by the (Anglia) people. The reason for acceptance was because the research had been conducted in an impartial and objective manner, and names were never used. This created, on the whole, trust between the interviewers and the interviewees and elicited interest and co-operation in the research on a wide scale”. Over the four years of study and practical application “the research found that the culture was adapting and changing in a very real and measurable sense. This was reassuring for the management (in particular for Dick Shepherd) who had doubted that cultural change could be effectively measured. The research also helped to prove to management that an in depth knowledge of their organizational culture was one of the most effective tools in organizational change. It became understood that cultural change was not a ‘soft issue’, but an integral practical issue with very real rewards in bringing about successful organizational change”.

Margaret Reidy Date: June, 2002
It should be noted that both cases are replication studies of *perceived managerial and leadership effectiveness* using the same research design, methodology and method as adopted in the previous replication studies cited above. As will be appreciated, the findings of the HM Customs and Excise (Anglia Region) case were used in support of an evidence-based OC initiative designed to improve the organization’s managerial culture, whereas the findings of the ‘TLFN’ case were used to guide a specific evidence-based HRD initiative concerned with executive leader development. In both cases, the academic credentials of the findings resulting from the ‘professional partnership’ studies contributed greatly to the research being accepted as relevant, reliable, applicable, and useful by people within the two respective organizations. A highly significant lesson learned from these two cases is that HRD initiatives informed by empirical evidence derived from good internal (‘home grown’) academically rigorous research—the results of which managers and employees find hard to discount or ignore—are likely to be more effective than initiatives guided by ‘prescriptive solutions’ offered in textbooks or by outside consultants.

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**Case Testimonial 2**

**TLFN Group plc**

The organization in which this collaborative professional-partnership research took place is a large UK-based multi-national retail telecommunications company which is referred to as TLFN Group PLC. The aim was to explore managerial culture at the executive leader level of the company to gain a better understanding of it. The results and their application have been published in a management related academic journal (see Hamlin & Sawyer, 2007).

**Personal Testimonial of the HRD Practitioner Partner — Jenni Sawyer**

The trigger for this research was the need to conduct a research project as part of the MSc in HRD and Organizational Change study programme that I was undertaking at the University of Wolverhampton Business School. At the time I was employed within the HR department of TLFN Group PLC. I chose to conduct a replication study of ‘managerial and leadership effectiveness’, and I found the extensive experience and knowledge gained through the process of selecting this research topic and methods of great benefit when it came to building a business case for conducting the research within my organization. This was a highly commercial environment, so it was important that I was able to demonstrate a projected return on that investment in time and resource. Following the identified need for a ‘one-company’ organizational and management approach, we needed to acquire a better understanding of the evolving culture within our UK business, as reflected by the behaviour of senior people. The key aim was to identify a set of behavioural criteria of managerial and leadership effectiveness that reflected ‘best practice’ within the company. The findings of the research challenged various aspects of the existing company-wide competency framework and raised a number of important questions to be explored. Most significantly ‘customer focus’ was found to be so core to the culture and values that the associated behaviours had become inherent and were therefore no longer recognised by senior people as indicators of managerial and leadership effectiveness. The findings were used to inform and shape the ongoing development of the company’s Executive Leader Development Programme. This research-informed programme was then planned to be applied across Europe.

Jenny Sawyer Senior HR Manager: TLFN Group plc (when the research took place)

Date 25 October 2013
Replication Research

The author’s long term goal when engaging as the HRD scholar partner in the two illustrative cases outlined above, and also in all previous and subsequent replication studies, has been to search for evidence of universalistic or generic behavioural criteria of perceived managerial and leadership effectiveness. The approach used has been informed by the notion of derived etic research (Berry, 1989) which is based on replication logic and multiple cross case comparative analysis (Eisenhardt, 1989). Consequently, each newly instigated replication study has replicated as closely as possible an earlier replication study carried out in the same organizational sector, thereby maximizing the comparability of the generated findings. This type of inquiry is consistent with what Tsang and Kwan (1999) have referred to as empirical generalization replication research, in which the same phenomenon experienced in multiple contexts is explored using the same research focus, philosophical perspective, methodology, and methods in order ultimately to develop mid-range theory. It is also consistent with van Aken’s (2009) notion of design science in the field of management. This type of research is primarily aimed at developing ‘general substantive and procedural design science’ to solve common ‘field problems’ within a particular discipline/field. However, van Aken claims the notion can also be used in the explanatory sciences to develop ‘general solution concepts’ and mid-range theory that can be used in multiple organizational contexts beyond the ones where the empirical research has been carried out; albeit limited in validity to that particular applied field or domain of practice (van Aken, 2007). For a more detailed explanation of design science and HRD research see Sadler-Smith (2015). Using the findings from the two cases illustrated above, together with the author’s replication studies in other organizations, Hamlin and Hatton (2013) have identified through multiple cross-case and cross-sector comparative analysis an emergent British taxonomy of perceived managerial and leadership effectiveness. Similarly, Patel and Hamlin (2012) have identified an emergent EU related taxonomy derived from replication studies in Germany, Romania and the UK. Both taxonomies could be used as ‘best evidence’ to support HRD intervention in various organizations similar to those outlined in the above illustrative case testimonials. Additionally they could be used by management and leadership development (MLD) practitioners to maximize their contribution to improving organizational effectiveness and performance through planned initiatives focused on the training and development of managers and leaders. Such evidence-based MLD interventions are more likely to result in the development of the style of ‘leadership’ and type of ‘culture’ that are most likely to be conducive to learning and effective organizational change agency, than those that typically persist following investment in conventional MLD programmes.

Discussion

The prime message of this article for HRD practitioners and HRD scholars is that by becoming critically reflective and evidence-based by using research to inform and evaluate practice, and by engaging in ‘professional partnership’ research, they will more likely: (i) make an important and valued contribution to the bridging of the much discussed ‘research-practice gap’ in the fields of HRD and management, and (ii) maximize their contribution to organizational effectiveness and long term business success. However, these contributions are unlikely to become a reality for HRD practitioners unless: (i) they can help line managers to overcome the five OCD ‘failings’ outlined earlier in this article, and (ii) they take the necessary steps to improve significantly their ‘credibility’ with managers so that they become welcomed as strategic business partners.
Herein lies a major challenge for MLD and other HRD practitioners who train, develop, and coach/mentor managers, and also for HRD scholars in universities who teach on management and HRD-related professional qualification programmes such as Master level degree courses in management, leadership, organizational change, OD, and HRD (see Hamlin, 2002). Hence, to increase their impact and effectiveness this author suggests that HRD scholars should consider: (i) incorporating ‘evidence-based practice’ into their everyday teaching; and (ii) being more open to Mode 2 research conducted in collaboration with HRD practitioners — rather than engaging solely with Mode 1 research. In so doing, it is recommended that they consider focusing some of their research effort into studying specific work-based ‘research problems’ of particular interest to managers and HRD practitioners in multiple organizations, sectors or even countries (what van Aken (2007) refers to as design science ‘field problems’) and for such studies to be conducted in ‘professional partnership’ arrangements whenever possible. Additionally, HRD scholars might also consider adopting ‘replication (empirical generalization) research’ approaches in partnership with HRD scholars in other universities and/or in other countries, for the purpose of exploring a particular ‘field problem’ that engages their common interest. In so doing, their joint aim would be the identification of geocentric/context-general concepts and constructs, and if possible the development of universalistic theories through ‘replication logic’ and ‘multiple cross-case comparative analysis’. An important message for top managers and business/organizational leaders resulting from the case for ‘professional partnership’ and ‘replication’ research presented in this article is that they are more likely to grow and optimize organizational capability and flexibility in a context of ongoing change, and thereby create high performance organizations that deliver sustainable business success if they: (i) give greater consideration to the ‘soft’ stuff of management when formulating organizational change strategies; (ii) allow line managers who implement the OC strategies to have sufficient time to attend to the ‘soft’ human side issues involved in the change management process; (iii) give recognition to the value of evidence-based management and evidence-based HRD approaches in bringing about effective and beneficial strategic organizational change and development: and (iv) sponsor ‘professional partnership’ research projects focused on ‘real-live’ organization-based problems or issues of concern.

In conclusion, this author strongly urges HRD professionals and line managers who wish to maximize their contribution to the effective and beneficial facilitation of organizational change (and development), to give serious consideration to the concepts of evidence-based HRD and evidence-based management.

References


The Author

Bob Hamlin is Emeritus Professor and Chair of Human Resource Development at the University of Wolverhampton, UK. His main research interest is exploring effective and ineffective managerial behaviour — including managerial coaching and mentoring effectiveness — as perceived by managers and employees within public, private, and third sector organizations. The results of his research have been published internationally in a broad range of management and HRD academic journals, and also in national practitioner publications. With various indigenous co-researchers he has replicated and continues to replicate his UK studies of perceived managerial and leadership effectiveness within a culturally diverse range of countries around the globe. His current aim is to use the results of these studies as empirical source data for conducting multiple case, cross-sector/cross-nation comparative analytic studies based on replication logic in search of empirical generalizations that might lead to new HRD related theory development.

Acknowledgement

This article has its origins in the author’s chapters in Organizational Change and Development: A Reflective Guide for Managers, Trainers and Developers (Hamlin, Keep and Ash, Eds, 2001) and forms (with permission from the publishers FT Prentice Hall/Pearson) the foundation for a developed and extended chapter contribution to a forthcoming book Bridging the Scholar-Practitioner Gap in Human Resources Development to be published by IGI Global.
Reconnecting Leaders to Organization Cultures

Jeff Gold, York St John University, UK

The article begins with a challenge to the view that leaders = leadership, suggesting that leadership can be found through patterns of working in which people exert influence on what is happening. Such patterns create difficulties for appointed leaders when they seek to bring about cultural change. The article then explores how leaders can tackle the difficulty of culture change through the use of action learning combined with appreciative inquiry where the latter focuses on conversations to find out what works well in organizations. Ongoing work from examples from two organizations are presented. The first, Company X sought to shift culture in response to the need to re-align strategy to build relationships more directly with consumers. The second, PublicBody, faced funding difficulties and a recent survey of staff opinions and attitudes had revealed a lowering of morale and engagement. In both cases, leaders used conversations with their staff to find examples of ‘really good work practice’. Findings were then shared in an action learning group to identify patterns and consider actions for improvement. The process allows leaders to set up further action learning groups to support further conversations which reveal further patterns of what is working.

Introduction

Many leaders and many organizations have sought to bring about a change or a shift in culture. In response to apparent dramatic changes in markets, technologies and funding regimes, leaders can become concerned that policies and procedures can be changed but unless there are also changes in underpinning values, beliefs and behaviours, the effect can be less than desirable. Researchers on changing organization cultures have known about this discrepancy for years. For example, Mats Alvesson and Stefan Sveningsson (2008) point to the tension between what is said, especially by leaders and managers, and what is actually done and experienced in the thoughts and feelings of those who are meant to change.

One of the most important difficulties is evident in the assumptions of leaders themselves. For example, it is relatively easy to fall into a way of thinking that everyone else has the same interest and concerns about the current and future direction of the organization as the leaders. That is, there is mostly unity among the staff. By contrast, it is probably the case that there are different versions about what is happening and what is considered the right or wrong thing to do. Such differences point to a less unified and more fragmented picture of an organization, reflecting the existence of several cultures and multiple values. This variation can make change and culture shift a very difficult problem.

In this article, the intention is to show how leaders can learn to understand the variety of cultures within their organizations. The vehicle to create such understanding is an approach to action learning, which brings more people into a process to progress the desired shift. If leaders participate in the journey, they will begin to bring different cultures closer together. Examples will be drawn from work in two organizations which are seeking to shift cultures.
The Fog of Leadership

Walk into any organization that is not yours and conduct a simple act of inquiry. For the first five people you encounter, ask them the following question:

Where is leadership?

The author cannot possibly tell you the answers you will get but suspects that, after an initial confusion, you might find a variety of responses ranging from the man or woman ‘at the top’ to interesting stories about the influence of others in the organization or others who have been in the organization, possibly from the past. What may be surprising is that the responses may provide a challenge to a commonly stated identity, that is:

Leaders = Leadership

This suggests that a very simple view of leadership is to see the people at the top as the leaders. This then makes it relatively easy to attribute the success of organizations and failure to particular individuals. They are heroes when things work and villains when they don’t. It also means that stories of success about Jack Welch and Richard Branson can be presented for others to consume. Individual attribution might also work in reverse when there is failure, such as with Enron and the more recent Global Financial Crisis. However, there does seem to be some reticence as well.

Seeing leadership as the leaders has been a preoccupation of people in organizations, including those in learning and development who are charged with training current and future leaders. The assumption is made that if the key features of what makes a good leader can be found, and this includes the need for a link to successful performance, then the training can be done. This has resulted in a very well developed industry of leadership development suppliers of toolkits and programmes. One of the most well-known and used tools in the toolkit is a framework of competences, sometimes called attributes or behaviours. The frameworks provide a simple argument for assessing, developing and measuring leaders. One does wonder how such frameworks were operating when decisions were made that took organizations into the danger zones of the late 2000s.

When it comes to the most prominent frameworks for leaders, the notion of transformational and charismatic leadership still holds sway. This is in spite of the fact that a very serious and rigorous consideration by van Knippenberg and Sitkin (2013) of the evidence for transformational leadership and the link to organization performance. They found so many problems both with understanding the idea of charismatic transformation leadership and how to measure and use it, that they suggested ‘going back to the drawing board’. So where do you go next?

One of the first moves suggested is to break the equation of leaders = leadership. There are leaders who are appointed to key positions of responsibility and are accountable for the working of an organization. But here’s the rub — leaders may have a duty to lead but leadership may not be entirely in their control. Indeed in any organization, even in small organizations, there are a variety of ways in which people exert influence on what is happening, mostly as expected but not always. If you use a little imagination, it will not take you too long to realize that throughout any organization, it is necessary for people to join together to get things done. They do this in twos and threes, but also in groups and teams and these dependencies are essential. Over time, patterns of working are formed and re-formed, stories are shared on what to do and norms and
values are set to guide behaviour — for good or ill. Further, this process provides the foundation and materials for what have been called communities of practice as originally explained by Lave and Wenger (1991).

Considering the patterns in terms of leadership, where influence is working between people, because this process works locally on the basis of what works, what is right and what is valued, leadership at this level may or may not align with what others may determine as the organization’s purpose, direction and values. In addition, because there is likely to be a large collection of different communities, each with valued ways of behaving and working, it becomes very difficult for those appointed as leaders to achieve declared outcomes. Instead, they are likely to face what might be better understood as an organization fog, shown in Figure 1.

![Figure 1: Organization as Fog](image)

Even if you only partly accept the accuracy of this image, it does provide some understanding of the difficulties appointed leaders face when they seek to change culture. However hard leaders work to find clarity, through reports, figures and even face-to-face contact, most of the time they can only gain a partial view of what is happening. The fog will soon reform.

How leaders can work their way into the fog and tackle the difficult task of shifting culture will now be considered. However, it must be stressed that the arguments pursued here are premised on the basis of embracing the idea of leadership within everyday working with multiple communities of practice. A form of action learning provides the vehicle to do this.

**Action Learning for Problems and Appreciation**

Most people involved in the field of practice called action learning would regard the work of Reg Revans (1983) as foundational, setting the standard for others. While there have been many variations on the basic ideas of Revans, after all he began his work in the 1950s, the classical approach to action learning involves problems that cannot be easily solved. Revans distinguished between puzzles which had an answer and intractable problems which have no clear answers and possibly none at all. For the latter, the best that can be done is to work with a group of peers or ‘comrades in adversity’ as Revans called them, and through a process of questions to challenge and support the person with a problem, an action can be found to try out, see what happens and, most importantly, learn from this process.
Problems and learning have been central to action learning for many years and many people have benefitted from this. However, all problems if they are real, are related to and connected to a context consisting of a wide range of factors that will affect what action is taken. But not all factors can be identified quickly and taken into consideration. This affects how those in an action learning process can structure problems. For leaders, how problems are understood becomes crucial to their actions as leaders, according to Keith Grint (2005) but when problems are unstructured, they are more difficult to state; this is mainly because of difficulties in understanding the current situation, or setting out what is a better situation or how to find the way to move from one situation to another. Because people generally try to avoid lack of clarity or have a low tolerance for ambiguity (or fog), there is a tendency to define problems, means and solutions based on prejudices and past experiences. Thus, the problem of culture shift might fall into the category as a clear move from one situation to another, as though everyone agreed with a solution. For example, if senior leaders declare that they want a culture that gives greater attention to and the valuing of customers, they might set this out as a path or roadmap to achieve this. However, such images, however clear, are likely to avoid the difficulties that might prevent progress, such as the priorities for action within different departments, the values and norms that are held by staff, the stories told about customers and others within everyday practice and so on.

What should now be clear is the difficulty of identifying all the relevant factors that need to be considered by leaders in seeking to change or shift culture. In terms of a problem that might be considered in action learning, culture change is very unstructured, making any move difficult and any effort made is likely to encounter a range of differing meanings and definitions of what is going on. One important manifestation may arise if culture change is expressed in terms of a problem. Leaders and those they involve may soon find that their interests are stymied by the response or lack of response from others, who might be termed as resistors, traditionalists or other negative categorizations. The danger is with what is normally considered as problem/solution reasoning which avoids possible dilemmas and consideration of others who have valued views of the situation. As ‘resistance’ is met and continues to persist, leaders might seek to impose more controls and tackle what they believe is wrong and unhealthy in their organizations. As they do so, new cures are found and applied but as these also fail, the result is a culture of deficit and negativity that is counter to what is desired. There is a real possibility that problem/solution approaches to change, despite positive intentions, might have little impact or worse, a negative effect, even if short-term evidence shows otherwise. Leaders who believe that their solutions correct in the face of other ideas are also avoiding the variety of different interpretations held by different communities, each with their own versions of what is right and good to do. The big question for leaders is how can they understand what is valued in the communities within organizations and which can provide an important impetus to shifting culture whilst also preserving what is best in the current culture?

One response is to move action learning away from problems and deficit towards what is valued and working. This makes use of key ideas drawn from a process called Appreciative Inquiry (AI), which works with conversations to find out what works well in an organization and how. Based on a process developed by Cooperrider and Srivastva (1987), it becomes possible through conversations to discover valuable knowledge which can be shared to stimulate learning but also lead to changes which are more acceptable because they come from the practices of what is already working and valued.
Central to AI is a conversation between at least two people where, in an effort to find out what is working and what is valued, a picture is developed which captures the meaning containing the strengths and virtues of what works. When a leader takes this positive orientation, they become both an inquirer through the gathering of data but also active in appreciating how people work. This can engender a positive momentum that elevates what is good and right.

AI can be understood and used quite flexibly, with no rules on times for stages. There is, however, guidance on the implementation of AI in the form of a cycle composed of four stages or phases. The cycle, shown as Figure 2, is a useful contrast to the traditional problem solving cycle. At the Discovery phase, the concern is to find out what is working well by having conversations with those who know what is working well. This highlights two key points about AI, which make it valuable in a culture shift process, especially if appointed leaders are participants. Firstly, through conversations, data is gathered by allowing others to tell stories of good practice. Stories are a well understood medium for the sharing of good ways of working in communities of practices and cover key events, characters involved, overall purpose and, crucially, what is valued (Weick 2012).

![The AI Cycle](image)

**Figure 2: The AI Cycle**  
Source: Cooperrider and Whitney, 2000: 614

AI is a conversational activity in which at least two people join in. Leaders, if they wish to participate in such conversations must appreciate what is presented and respond accordingly. The stories must be treated as truthful and valued. This allows the second point to emerge: the stories can be collected and analysed for patterns and themes but based on real examples of practice. These can then be used to work out new possibilities for action and change in the Dreaming and Design phases. Whatever actions are considered need to be grounded in what is working and this makes whatever is agreed more feasible because it is not imposed from the outside; the actions and change are based on what is already happening inside the organization. However, whatever is designed must be delivered and this involves action by others. Again, conversations play a crucial part in this and as actions are taken, further understanding is gained and new phases of the AI cycle can begin. What is very important is that if leaders are part of this process, and they remain appreciative, they will learn about life in their organizations but will also be seen as promoters of positive actions because they have listened and appreciated. What now follows are examples from two organizations.
Culture Shift by Positive Action Learning (PAL)

To consider how action learning can work with AI this article draws on work completed with two organizations where leaders were seeking a culture shift. The first is a UK-based but US-owned design and production company which will be referred to as Company X. The second is a large public sector organization which will be referred to as PublicBody. Both organizations are located in the North of England and are considered important to local employment. Company X employs 2200 staff and PublicBody employs 8500.

For Company X, the leaders came to realize in 2012 that following some dramatic loss of sales and key contracts, there was a need to re-align strategy to build relationships more directly with consumers by increasing brand awareness. This was a striking difference to the previous 30 years where brand awareness rested principally with retailers such as large supermarkets and smaller independent shops who sold Company X’s products to consumers, who usually did not know the source of the product. It was soon recognized that the re-direction of the organization would also require a shift in culture, even as staff were being made redundant. The project initiated sought to build a culture of engagement to enable change agility.

The project’s objectives were set to:

1. Share best practice across the organization through building effective networks.
2. Re-energize communication processes.
3. Reinforce a culture of leadership at all levels to create a non-hierarchical “power base”.

For PublicBody, the challenges faced were the same as many others operating in the public sector in the UK, relying mostly on central funding. There were statutory targets but as funding cuts began to take effect, there were shrinking resources with which to achieve the targets. A recent survey of staff opinions and attitudes had revealed a lowering of morale and engagement. This was, however, consistent with what had been happening in other public sector organizations in the UK. PublicBody’s declared purpose stated:

- Put our communities first, responding to your needs and concerns.
- Treat you with care, compassion, humility and respect.
- Work with our communities and partners to solve local problems.
- Do what we say we will and keep you informed.

In both organizations, based on the recognition of the need for culture shift, an approach was developed that combined action learning with appreciative inquiry (AI). Since the plan involved using what was working in each organization as a way for leaders to discover and articulate what was a desired and feasible culture move, leading to action based on good practice, this approach was called Positive Action Learning or PAL. This felt particularly right for such a process and related comfortably with Revans’ notion of action learning participants as ‘comrades’. In each organization the process began with with PAL groups of leaders. There were five in the group in Company X and seven in PublicBody. At the first meeting of each group, both action learning and AI were introduced. However, in order to provide a baseline for improvement for each group, problem identification was taken as a way of setting the current state of the culture.
The question was posed: What were the key cultural problems and challenges?

A simple process was used based on a method called the nominal group technique where each person in each group could identify their view of the problems in response to the question posed. These could then be gathered and displayed through a round-robin process, allowing avoidance of duplication. Based on what was now in view, the participants could then specify the key dimensions for improvement. In each case, a set of dimensions were established which could be scored on the basis of 0 = starting baseline, 10 = fulfilment of improvement.

In Company X, the dimensions agreed are given in Table 1.

**Company X Agreed Dimensions**

- We have a 1 year strategy focused on delivery: we don’t see a year 2 and 3 plan.
- There is a lack of ongoing communication: update/ where are we winning.
- Politics influences the strategy delivery and we aren’t waking the talk.
- Lack of clear visibility of the leadership team (walking the talk, being aligned, listening and being seen together).
- Lack of a clear detailed vision/plan for year 1/2/3 with outcomes, actions and timings.
- Lack of engagement of all to really believe in the future.
- We don’t have a common understanding of what the true issues are.
- There is no honest and open regular update on business performance with sufficient detail for people to take action.
- We aren’t energizing people around what they can/ need to do.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Company X Agreed Dimensions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• We have a 1 year strategy focused on delivery: we don’t see a year 2 and 3 plan.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Lack of clear visibility of the leadership team (walking the talk, being aligned, listening and being seen together).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Lack of a clear detailed vision/plan for year 1/2/3 with outcomes, actions and timings.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Lack of engagement of all to really believe in the future.</td>
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<td>• We don’t have a common understanding of what the true issues are.</td>
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<tr>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>• We aren’t energizing people around what they can/ need to do.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 1: Company X Agreed Dimensions**

In PublicBody, the Leaders were responding to a culture audit of the organization which had sought to assess current and future cultures against purpose, vision and values using a web based survey. The survey had been completed by 2390 staff. In addition, there had been four focus groups with 36 staff from across all grades.

Using their understanding from the audit report, the following dimensions were set. The leaders were able to specify not just the baseline positions at 0, but also a more desirable position at 10. Using their understanding from the audit report eight dimensions were established (Table 2).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Engagement</th>
<th>0</th>
<th>10</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Top down, not engaged</td>
<td>Full and two-way engagement</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low, lack of explanation Not knowing why</td>
<td>High, belief, knowing why</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low challenge, blame culture</td>
<td>High challenge, low blame</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Top down, own agenda, narrow promotion criteria</td>
<td>Multi-sourced, developmental</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disconnected, words not enacted. Poor role modelling</td>
<td>Reconnected, good role modelling. Doing and saying synchronized</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pushed upward, low discretion</td>
<td>High discretion</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low integration, competing districts</td>
<td>High integration. Collaboration</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mixed messages, top down</td>
<td>Clarity, joint meaning</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 2: PublicBody, Baseline Positions and More Desirable Positions.**
Setting baselines was an important process for both groups since it allowed a vision of what progress might mean. The intention was not to set up another survey process since both organizations had endured several surveys and a degree of cynicism among the leaders and the staff was starting to emerge. Too often in the past, surveys had not resulted in sustainable actions and change. Leaders had assumed too readily that top-down change would feed through to everyone else. However, such changes were usually lost ‘in the fog’. However in the context of an action learning process combined with AI, the indicators could provide a focus for the projects and, as others were engaged within each organization, some sense that shift might be occurring.

Once these indicators were established, the research moved away from the problems and deficiencies of the present. It was easily recognized that all the dimensions had long historical roots and how various attempts to address some of these had been partial and mostly failing. AI was introduced and this involved a simple process to work with conversations that appreciated what was working in their organizations. As a first step, the leaders could identify examples from their own experience of what was called ‘really good work practice’ or rgwp. They were asked to write responses to the following:

1. Identify an example known to you of a really good work practice (rgwp).
2. What happened that made it rgwp? – write a sentence.
4. What are the implications of this rgwp for others? – bullet point.

The leaders were made aware of the process by allowing them to work in pairs to practice the appreciative interview, using the same questions to guide them. Leaders began to understand how AI worked and the value of conversations. There was a quick response to indicate empowerment and interest, and how change could be enabled. This allowed the task of finding others in each organization to interview to be set. This was called unfamiliar appreciation in unfamiliar settings since there was a preference to find others who they did not normally talk to.

**Company X**

In Company X, the group held interviews throughout the organization, keeping a record of what was working and how learning from each process could be applied. At the first review meeting, findings were shared and a list of the key words was compiled, shown in Table 3.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Key Words</th>
<th>Key Words</th>
<th>Key Words</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dynamic</td>
<td>Engagement</td>
<td>Collaborative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resilience to change</td>
<td>Environment/ culture:</td>
<td>Visibility</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Talent retention</td>
<td>attractive</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charismatic leadership team</td>
<td>Simple and less complex</td>
<td>Ownership</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alignment: all working to</td>
<td>Work life balance</td>
<td>Protected from reality vs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>the same goal</td>
<td>Cross functional working</td>
<td>change agile</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clear communication: team</td>
<td>Pride in achievements</td>
<td>Flexibility</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>days</td>
<td></td>
<td>Knowledge sharing</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Celebrate success: recognition

Showing commitment: saying it and doing it

Credibility

Embrace learning from mistakes

Enthusiasm

Influence to business

Perceived value

Proactive

Empathy

Positive influencers

Mutual respect: boss to team; team peers

Table 3: Key Words from the Appreciative Interviews (Company X)

The ideas for how learning could be applied in other parts of the business included:

1. Share knowledge.
2. Swap logistics people into manufacturing.
3. Build a culture of networking: e.g. cross functional workshops: share specialist skill sets.
4. Practice empowerment: allow different decisions to be made and adopt a true coaching culture.
5. Learn from other businesses / areas.
6. Consistency in communication messages.
   - How are we performing and what can I do?
   - Acting on decisions quickly.
7. Celebrate success and recognize people: little treats and thank yous / individuals and teams.
8. Honesty: tell it how it is and enable individuals to rise to the challenges.
10. Alignment and detail: clear accountability from the exec down.

The above was based on each person conducting three interviews but in doing this, the Leaders experienced a process of engagement with staff. They discovered a number of ‘first times’:

- Those interviewed often felt that no one had taken any interest in what they were doing and what was valued.
- Gaining ‘confidence’ and feeling ‘empowered’ were consistent findings.

At end of the first review, the leaders considered the AI cycle and how they moved from discovery to dreaming and then design. A question was posed:

How do we start to build a network of positive influencers within Company X using the AI approach?

The dreaming became a design through the articulation of a project plan involving the spreading of the PAL process to others with each Leader facilitating a PAL group. This would create a network of PAL groups. The idea was to replicate the experience of the Leader group, now called the Champion Group. This would mean more people in the organization who were paying
attention to what was working and more people feeling appreciated for telling their stories. The data collected would also reveal what was being valued within communities of practice which the Leaders now had some access to. One of the most common stories was the presence of ‘Inspirational leadership at all levels’.

The Leaders found 20 others who were invited to learning about PAL, using the same process as their own. It was made clear that joining the project was voluntary but all 20 were happy to participate and formed into five PAL groups, each facilitated by a Leader. Three weeks later a review was held and stories were reported. In addition, the Leaders were also building appreciation into practice. One story related to a meeting where, without prompting, a Leader had been able to focus on positive practice and what was working, which created a good atmosphere among those present. At a meeting of the senior management team, the CEO reported his interest in the importance of positive stories and that they “do not see enough of the good often enough”.

Progress could also be assessed against the baseline dimensions. The sample is far from representative (24), but indicated a sense of confidence among the PAL groups, as shown in Table 4.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Score</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>We have a 1 year strategy focused on AOP delivery: we don’t see a year 2 and 3 plan.</td>
<td>5.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>There is a lack of ongoing communication: update/ where are we winning.</td>
<td>5.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Politics influences the strategy delivery and we aren’t waking the talk.</td>
<td>5.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of clear visibility of the leadership team (walking the talk, being aligned, listening and being seen together).</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of a clear detailed vision/plan for year 1/2/3 with outcomes , actions and timings.</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of engagement of all to really believe in the future.</td>
<td>5.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We don’t have a common understanding of what the true issues are.</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>There is no honest and open regular update on business performance with sufficient detail for people to take action.</td>
<td>5.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We aren’t energizing people around what they can/ need to do.</td>
<td>4.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4: Movement Against the Baseline (Company X)

By the time of the third review with the champion group, a process for recording interview results was in place and all groups were now engaged with several examples of what was working. Participants were feeling the sense of empowerment as they held interviews and were also learning the importance holding such conversations ‘outside the silos’. Importantly, there was a feeling that ‘the ship was steadying, with light at the end of the tunnel’, although a continuing tension between cynicism and credibility remained.

PublicBody

In PublicBody, the seven Leaders went through the same process to learn the key features of AI and the skills of appreciative interviewing. A process of recording data for at least three interviews per person was agreed. It was also agreed to focus on the first items of concern that was revealed by the culture audit – engagement and trust. In particular, using the positive parts
of the dimensions, the Leaders sought work practices where these were enacted.

At the first review, each Leader was able to share findings. Once again, there was a sense that positive conversations had provided energy and satisfaction to others in the organization. There were many examples of good practice relating to engagement and trust. The data was collected with a focus on the actions and behaviour that were contained in the interviews. These were then used to form six themes as shown in Table 5.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Communication</th>
<th>Consult and Listen</th>
<th>Attitude</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Dispel myths.</td>
<td>• Facilitate meetings.</td>
<td>• Equal partner working.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Provide clarity.</td>
<td>• Ask why.</td>
<td>• Non-hierarchic working.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Avoid rumours.</td>
<td>• Consider multiple voices and perspectives.</td>
<td>• Gain willingness of all partners.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Show awareness of issues.</td>
<td>• Show empathy.</td>
<td>• Show humility.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Review and Challenge</th>
<th>Reward and Recognition</th>
<th>Ideas and Innovation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Show honesty.</td>
<td>• Everyday and ongoing.</td>
<td>• Take responsibility.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Create opportunities.</td>
<td>• Transparent.</td>
<td>• Reduce blame.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Support confidence to challenge.</td>
<td>• Consistency.</td>
<td>• Show support and trust.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Reduce barriers.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5: Themes for Engagement and Trust (Public Body)

The process was repeated for the issue of confidence and decision-making, resulting in further elucidation of themes based on actions and behaviours. It was soon recognized that the theme of communication was central to culture shift. In particular, there was a recognition of the failure of leaders and others in PublicBody to understand the complexity and sophistication of communication. This tended to mean an over-reliance on e-mail and top-down messages. Using the findings from AI, the Leaders agreed to the development of a Communications Workshop to be undertaken by Division Leadership Teams in the six divisions of the organizations.

After three cycles, the Leaders were ready to form PAL groups in each division with at least four other members for each group. This would allow Division Leaders’ Teams to learn about good practices in the localized cultures of their division. For example, using the issue of leadership as a starting point, the findings in one division revealed the key actions and behaviours, shown as Table 6.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Responsiveness</th>
<th>Recognition of Value</th>
<th>Trust</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Shows awareness of needs.</td>
<td>• Decide suitability for task.</td>
<td>• Show confidence in ability.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Realizing the requirement.</td>
<td>• Appreciate skills.</td>
<td>• Delegate authority.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Acting.</td>
<td>• Deploy.</td>
<td>• Review results.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Reviewing the impact.</td>
<td>• Review knowledge gained.</td>
<td>• Recognize achievement.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Energize others.</td>
<td>• Give credit.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Managing Ambiguity
• Identification of problem.
• Open to differences in perception.
• Create space for differences.
• ‘Iron out’ differences.
• Clarify agreed positions.
• Articulate shared understanding.

Gaining Commitment for Unity
• Show sensitivity to concerns.
• Perspective taking.
• Explaining reasons.
• Recognition of sacrifices.
• Staying in touch.

The Front Officer as Leader
• Grant authority.
• Trust to act.
• Data gathering and interpretation.
• See the patterns.
• See the bigger picture and the detail.
• Access resources.
• Find, organize and coordinate interested parties.
• Measure results, impact and follow up.

Table 6: Themes for Leadership in One Division (Public Body)

In addition to showing key themes for leaders, the findings also revealed, perhaps for the first time, the importance of leaders at a local level, who had to work interdependently with service users and other agencies. Similar patterns were shown in the findings from other divisions, each providing important indicators for good practice and in so doing ‘feeding’ the culture shift. The words had to become deeds.

The ongoing monitoring of progress against the baseline indicators was starting to show some movement (Table 7), although the sample size (31) was not yet representative.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Engagement</th>
<th>Trust</th>
<th>Confidence</th>
<th>Review and Feedback</th>
<th>Leadership</th>
<th>Decision-Making</th>
<th>Silo-Working</th>
<th>Change</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>4.3</td>
<td>4.0</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>3.8</td>
<td>4.4</td>
<td>3.8</td>
<td>3.6</td>
<td>4.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 7: Movement Against the Baseline (PublicBody)

The evidence of shift is still emerging in PublicBody, but what is heartening, even at a time of continuing budget cuts, is that some of the leaders were seeing life in the fog, and appreciating the good work being completed, from which key lessons were being developed for the whole organization. As well as the roll out to Division Leaders, there were now plans for an extension of PAL more broadly to managers and a use of the knowledge gained to provide stories of good practice which could be introduced at appropriate moments. Culture shift could be enacted in the very processes of organizing.

Summary

As argued at the start of this article, culture change is fraught with difficulty, not least as a result of the failure of those who are appointed as leaders to become disconnected from the everyday working of life in communities of practice. Further, there is a tendency for leaders to seek to set
out for others, in the fog, a portrayal of what is desirable but not enacted. Leaders have to start from the position of not knowing their organizations but wanting to find out. Instead of construing their ignorance and the failure of change and culture shift as a problem, they can instead work from the assumption that for most of time, most of the workforce in any organization is seeking to do things that are right, good and valued. It is the task of leaders to appreciate the value attached by communities to what they do. This article has shown how in two organizations, leaders have tried, and are continuing to try, to do this.

References


The Author

Jeff Gold is Professor at York St John University and Visiting Professor at Portsmouth University.

He has worked closely with organisations such as Skipton Building Society, Hallmark Cards, the Police Service and Leeds Bradford Boiler Company. Recent projects in the NHS have included evaluation of a team coaching programme, design and development of a behaviour framework for Non Executive Directors in NHS Boards, a futures action learning programme and evaluation of health innovation projects for Leeds North CCG.

He is the co-author of CIPD’s Leadership and Management Development (with Richard Thorpe and Alan Mumford), The Gower Handbook of Leadership and Management Development (with Richard Thorpe and Alan Mumford), Human Resource Development (with Julie Beardwell, Paul Iles, Rick Holden and Jim Stewart) and Human Resource Management (with John Bratton), both published by Palgrave.
Apprenticeship Management at National and Company Levels: Research Based ‘Good Practice’ Principles

Erica Smith, Federation University, Australia

HRD professionals are often involved closely with apprenticeship systems. Apprenticeships operate within companies but are almost always linked to a national apprenticeship system which provides legislation and regulation around aspects of apprenticeship. Most countries around the world have a formal apprenticeship system, although systems vary widely in their nature, their relative size and their sophistication.

The paper aims to provide a contribution to both policy and practice. It draws together and analyses three pieces of research undertaken between 2007 and 2013 by the author: one international comparative study on national apprenticeship systems, and two Australian projects on the ways in which companies manage their apprentices. The paper shows how the findings about good practice in apprenticeship management can be used at both national and company levels. The international study was funded by the International Labour Organization and the World Bank, and the Australian studies were funded by the National Centre for Vocational Education Research.

Introduction

Apprenticeships have been undergoing a revival for the past decade (Rauner and Smith, 2010) accelerated by the Global Financial Crisis of 2008 and its effects on youth unemployment. Countries have been revising their apprenticeship systems (e.g. in Ireland [Doran, 2015]), often looking to international comparisons in order to adopt practices that have worked elsewhere. As apprenticeships are, in almost all countries, employment-based, the system depends on employers being willing and able to offer jobs to would-be apprentices. A large proportion of companies in many countries therefore have an involvement with the apprenticeship system, ranging from employing one or two apprentices at any one time, to managing systems for hundreds of apprentices at multiple sites in the home country and sometimes overseas.

In order to gain maximum value from this common model for training and employment, it is helpful for both policy-makers and employers to examine good practice across the world. The international comparative research reported here involved eleven countries and a team of international researchers. The enterprise-level research studies were confined to Australia and focused on larger companies that had apprenticeship management systems in place. They were undertaken as part of national projects related to quality in apprenticeships and traineeships. For both national and company-level apprenticeship systems, principles of good practice, derived from the data, were proposed, and this paper draws together and further analyses these principles.

Because of the nature of the topic — systems which involve national governments, millions of companies world-wide, and many millions of apprentices — it is difficult for research to capture either the diversity or the complexity of apprenticeship systems, or to extract good practice principles that can be applied by companies. This paper makes a contribution by providing
analyses drawn from both system-level and company-level research. In the projects reported here, country case studies and company case studies alike were produced in a structured way, allowing comparisons to be drawn in a systematic manner. Moreover, the initial reports of all three projects were peer-reviewed, helping to ensure that the data are trustworthy.

**Context and Background**

The term ‘apprenticeship’ can be interpreted in many different ways, but a formal apprenticeship system is generally understood to have the following characteristics (Smith, 2010):

- A training regime set up by, or with the approval of, governments.
- A combination of off and on the job training.
- The assumption of responsibility by the employer for the development of the apprentice.
- The award of a qualification and/or licence and/or some other recognition that enables an occupation to be practised independently once the apprenticeship is successfully completed.

The German ‘dual’ system is commonly regarded as the ‘gold standard’ for apprenticeship (Pilz and Li, 2014). However, as has been pointed out (e.g. Deissinger, 2004) the system faces some challenges and has been in need of modernization. ‘Dual’ refers to the inclusion of ‘school’ or institution-based learning as well as company learning; in Germany, apprenticeships are normally undertaken by teenagers in a particular stream of the secondary school system, as opposed to the U.K. and Australia, for example, where apprentices have normally left secondary schooling. However, in both of the two latter countries, apprenticeships can now be commenced while at school (e.g. Clarke, Klatt, Dulfer and Cruikshank, 2015) and in some instances in the U.K. may include higher education qualifications (Bentwood and Baker, 2013). The German model is also utilized in Austria and Switzerland, although there are some differences among the systems, as Deissinger and Gonon (2015) point out in a comparison between Germany and Switzerland. In some countries, such as India, there is no compulsory off-the-job training, and in other countries, there are large informal apprenticeship systems.

Smith (2010) notes that apprenticeships are often expected to fulfil multiple functions, including (but not limited to) the following: a passage to adulthood for young people, a means of industry and national skill formation, and a means of developing occupational identity in a trade. While apprenticeships perform many useful functions, there is also a darker side; they are used as a means of restricting entry to occupations and in the past, access to apprenticeships has been denied to certain groups in some countries. For example Wedekind (2013) notes that black people were not allowed to undertake apprenticeships under apartheid in South Africa. It has also been pointed out by many commentators (e.g. Cockburn, 1981) that there are gender issues too; in some countries apprenticeships have traditionally been confined to a small number of ‘trades’ and by the nature of those occupations involved, have been available mainly to men.

Quality in apprenticeship is a perennial concern. Lucas and Spencer (2014) remind us that quality in apprenticeship should primarily relate to the nature and extent of learning, both on and off the job, but this can be forgotten in policy debates, which focus on system-level issues. The latter are certainly important, often involving issues around funding, reporting and accountability.
Concerns seem to be particularly evident when apprenticeship systems are being expanded rapidly, a reasonable concern because new employers and/or new training providers without experience become involved (Smith and Brennan Kemmis, 2013). Quality concerns that relate to traineeships (a newer form of apprenticeship) in Australia (e.g. Schofield, 2000) are mirrored in criticisms of the expansion of the apprenticeship system in UK, from the introduction of Modern Apprenticeships (e.g. Fuller and Unwin, 2003) to the more recent expansion of the U.K. system announced in 2015, to involve many more occupations and a range of qualification levels. Fuller and Unwin (2013) argue that apprenticeships should be closely linked to occupations and that they are deficient where this is not the case. More generally, in the U.K., apprenticeships outside traditional trades are often believed to be of lower quality than those of the pre-expansion period, and there is frequent reference to ‘diluting the brand’, as Lucas and Spencer (2014) point out.

As it becomes increasingly commonplace for companies to become global in their operations, the interactions of companies with local apprenticeship systems becomes a complicated matter. Pilz and Li (2014) find two different models for multi-national companies: one where companies adopt local apprenticeship systems (‘divergence’) and the other where companies implement the German system as far as possible throughout all countries of operation (‘convergence’), but note that there has been little research into the topic. Pilz and Li (2014) also remind us that the German apprenticeship system is ‘exported’ to other countries in a more general manner, as many countries in Africa and Asia utilize the advice of German (or Swiss or Austrian) apprenticeship experts in setting up their own apprenticeship systems (Smith, 2014). The German model has even been trialled in the United States (Wyman and Gedge, 2015).

In the paper, the international project is discussed first, followed by the two Australian projects that investigated apprenticeship at company level. In each section, the method for that section is followed by the findings. The Australian section also contains additional literature specifically relating to the Australian system.

International Comparison

Research method

Project 1: ‘Towards a model apprenticeship framework: a comparative analysis of national apprenticeship systems’ (Smith, Brennan Kemmis et al., 2013) was carried out in 2012 and was undertaken to provide data on good practice in apprenticeship systems internationally, to assist with the redesign and expansion of the Indian apprenticeship system. Eleven highly-structured country case studies, some in developed countries (e.g. Canada, Germany) and others in less-developed countries (e.g. Indonesia, Turkey), were included in the international comparative phase. The choice of countries was guided by the funding bodies. Each case study was required to be validated by two in-country experts: one a senior government official, and the other a senior academic in the area. A cross-case analysis was undertaken to draw out the key features of these case studies as a preliminary step to identifying recommendations and principles for a model apprenticeship system that might inform the further development of India’s apprenticeship system.

The cross-case analysis was informed by a number of international documents (INAP Commission, 2012; Smith, 2010; and European Commission, 2012). As part of the analysis, examples of good practice were derived. Case study authors provided responses to a section on issues, strengths,
weaknesses and learning from policy developments. A ‘model apprenticeship framework’ was then developed. This framework consisted, among other features, of a set of principles in specific domains. In this paper, the set of principles is the main focus of the international data.

The findings of Research Project 1 (Smith, Brennan Kemmis et al., 2013) relate primarily to structural matters associated with national apprenticeship systems. The cross-case analysis undertaken in the research project showed that there were a number of differences among apprenticeship systems internationally. For example, some apprenticeship systems were large, with over 1.5% of the workforce employed as apprentices (e.g. Australia, Germany) and some were very small for the country’s size (e.g. India, Turkey, United States). Some countries, despite the small size of their systems, had a high policy focus on apprenticeships (e.g. South Africa, Turkey). Some countries (e.g. Germany, France) restricted apprenticeships predominantly to young people and/or to certain occupations; others (e.g. England, Australia, Indonesia) routinely included adults as well as young people; others made apprenticeships available mainly to adults (e.g. Canada, United States). Some countries required apprentices to be paid a wage; others did not, paying a stipend or allowance only e.g. Egypt, Indonesia).

Despite these major differences, countries had similar policy thrusts for their apprenticeship systems. At the time of the study, they were all aiming at increasing participation by employers, and increasing participation by individuals, including targeting specific learner groups, for example, women, ethnic minorities and people with disabilities. Many were working on aligning apprenticeship systems with national and/or international qualifications frameworks. All were attempting to address youth unemployment with specifically youth-targeted initiatives under the umbrella of apprenticeships. Most were trying to increase the range of apprenticeable occupations, and to improve the status of apprenticeships. Most were grappling with the issue of harmonization of apprenticeship regulations across State or Provincial boundaries. There were also concerns to align the systems with the changing structure of economies, for example to ensure that apprenticeship systems covered growing industries, and that there were methods for adding new occupations to lists of apprenticeable occupations.

Following further analysis of the data, including those issues that the country experts had identified as strengths and weaknesses, a set of principles were proposed as those that should underpin a national apprenticeship system. It was recognized that not all principles could in practice be adopted in all countries. It was also cautioned that apprenticeship systems grew from historical and cultural roots and that one country’s system could never be transported wholesale to another country; nonetheless, individual features could be adopted. Table 1 summarizes these principles.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Domain</th>
<th>Associated Good Practice Principles</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. System’s coverage of</td>
<td>• Apprenticeships available in all industries.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>occupations</td>
<td>• Apprenticeships available in a range of occupations, particularly those that are typically undertaken by women as well as men.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Participation by</td>
<td>• Apprenticeships open to people of either gender and all ages.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>individuals as apprentices</td>
<td>• Apprenticeships available in rural and regional as well as urban areas.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Clear pathways for school-leavers; pathways for disadvantaged people and for people without necessary entry qualifications.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Availability of off-the-job programmes to facilitate entry to an apprenticeship.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Pathways into apprenticeship (and beyond) are clear and well-publicised in ways that reach all potential candidates.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
3. Comprehensive national governance structures

- National policy emphasis is both on training aspects and on employment aspects of apprenticeship.
- Good liaison between government agencies responsible for different aspects of the apprenticeship system.
- Where responsibilities lie with states and provinces as well as national governments, relative responsibilities are well-defined and publicised.
- Rigorous qualifications that are regularly updated.
- Collection of appropriate data about apprenticeships.
- Systems are not inherently biased towards particular geographical areas (e.g. urban versus rural).

4. Involvement of stakeholders

- All major stakeholder groups (employers, training providers, employer groups and employee associations/trade unions) are involved in the development and maintenance of apprenticeship regulation and structures.
- A commitment to collaboration among the various stakeholders.
- Regulated system for adding new occupations to the apprenticeship system according to specified criteria.

5. Strength of quality systems

**Quality systems for training providers**

- Training providers are subject to quality regimes including audits.
- Content of qualifications is viewable on the internet.
- Requirements for qualifications/training for teachers in training providers.
- Trade testing at the conclusion of the apprenticeship, managed externally to the enterprise and the training provider (e.g. national ‘Red Seal’ examination system in Canada and local examination boards in Germany).

**Quality systems for employers**

- A registration scheme for enterprises/employing organizations offering apprenticeships, with requisite criteria; proportionate criteria (i.e. less stringent) developed for small and medium enterprises (SMEs), especially micro-businesses.
- Supervision ratios in companies, which are communicated and enforced as part of maintenance of registration.
- Requirements for qualifications/training for in-company trainers.
- On-the-job training subject to some form of overseeing.
- Continuing upskilling programmes for company trainers and teachers.
- Industry bodies communicate with employers about apprenticeships.

6. Simplification of apprenticeship systems

- Harmonization across State/Provincial jurisdictions to enhance mobility and improve understanding of systems.
- Consistency of contract periods for completion of apprenticeships (or at least no more than two or three allowable choices of length, as in Turkey).
- Clear delineation of responsibilities of the employer, the training provider and the apprentice.
- Removal of parallel systems within one country where feasible; or if not, clear communication processes.
7. Incentives for participation

- Financial incentives for enterprises to participate, subject to monitoring of satisfactory performance including audits.
- Additional incentives for employers to employ disabled or disadvantaged people as apprentices.
- Public funding for training providers.
- Discounted wages for apprentices (either a lower overall rate or non-payment while at off-the-job training).
- Payment of social contributions for apprentices by the State.
- Financial incentives to apprentices to complete their contracts and to employers who continue to employ their apprentices after completion.

8. Support for apprentices and for employers

Support for apprentices

- Assistance in meeting entry requirements and/or learning support once employed.
- Employed status within an enterprise.
- A combination of on and off the job learning with around 20% of time at a training provider and attainment of a recognized qualification.
- A training plan within the company.
- Opportunities to experience different workplaces if in a limited environment and a chance to mix with apprentices from other enterprises.
- A ‘case manager’ to oversee progress in off and on the job training (e.g. ‘pedagogical referent tutor’ in France).
- Opportunity to switch employers for good reason.
- An increase in pay over the period of an apprenticeship and a higher rate of pay on completion.
- A chance to progress further to higher level employment or self-employment.

Support for employers

- Provision to enterprises of suggested workplace curriculum and advice on cohort management systems for enterprises.
- Support for small and medium enterprises, through structured arrangements, by specified bodies.
- Support for employers rather than punitive measures for non-compliance.
- Easily-available information about the system for would-be apprentices and employers (e.g. available via the ‘Ellis chart’, a comparative chart of apprentice training programmes across Canada).
- Fall-back system for apprentices whose employer can no longer afford to employ them (e.g. Group Training Organisations in Australia, or interim ‘out of trade’ arrangements).

Table 1: Model apprenticeship framework for national apprenticeship systems — domains and principles

The principles are all drawn from existing practices in the case study countries, and some national systems displayed many of them already. They are, of course, more easily achievable in countries with higher levels of resources allocated to the training system. Countries with well-developed apprenticeship systems, however, may find it more difficult to adapt because interests are so well entrenched. This challenge was noted, for example, in the German case study in this project.
Company Level Research Projects: Australia

Background on the Australian system

A brief overview of the Australian system follows. The formal apprenticeship system in Australia was established soon after the Second World War and was confined to a defined number of occupations, mainly undertaken by male manual workers. The system remained relatively static until the mid-1980s, when traineeships were introduced (Knight, 2012). Traineeships expanded apprentice-like arrangements into many occupational areas that had not previously supported contracted training, such as retail, tourism and hospitality. In 1997 the traditional apprenticeship and the traineeship systems were brought together under the umbrella of the ‘New Apprenticeship’, now called ‘Australian Apprenticeship’, system, although in common usage they are usually referred to separately. Traineeships tend to be shorter than traditional apprenticeships, typically one to two years, and are often in industry areas which have not previously had accredited training. There has been some controversy around the availability of government funding for this purpose (e.g. Schofield, 2000), although the funding is no greater, and often less, than that for traditional apprenticeships. In some industry areas, traineeship qualifications have been used for initial training for ‘shop floor’ type occupations with large numbers of workers, with companies reporting that the availability of such training is a good recruitment and motivational tool (Smith, Comyn, Brennan Kemmis and Smith, 2009). At the height of the Australian apprenticeship system, in 2011, there were almost 449,000 apprentices and trainees in training (National Centre for Vocational Education Research [NCVER], 2012). This constituted 3.7% of the working population of just over 12 million people, proportionately on a par with the German system. However, funding cuts for traineeships since 2012 have led to a rapid decline, so that the number of apprentices and trainees decreased by 10.3% in 2013 alone, from 346,600 to 311,000 students (NCVER, 2015). The decline was almost entirely in traineeships rather than traditional apprenticeships.

In Australia, some intermediary organizations, partly funded by government, are involved in apprenticeships and traineeships. These include Australian Apprenticeship Centres (since mid-2015, known as Apprenticeship Network Providers), which manage the contractual arrangements between employer and apprentices/trainee. In about 12% of apprenticeships and traineeships, Group Training Organisations (GTOs) are involved. These act as the actual employer of the apprentice/trainee, with the employer paying a fee to the GTO to cover wages and administrative arrangements (Bush and Smith, 2007). This removes some of the risk of employing an apprentice/trainee, as the latter can be ‘returned’ to the GTO if unsuitable or in the event of a business downturn. As with most other countries, a training provider (known as a Registered Training Organisation [RTO]) is responsible for the off-the-job training and the award of the related qualification. Finally, it needs to be explained that in Australia, apprenticeships and traineeships can in theory be delivered entirely ‘on the job’ meaning the students need not be required to attend a training provider (Smart, 2001). However, RTOs are required to visit students for specified number of hours annually, and maintain regular contact by phone and email, and are responsible for the assessment of learners.

Research method

The Australian section of the paper draws on data from two studies (Table 2).
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Project No.</th>
<th>Project Title</th>
<th>Date of Research</th>
<th>Overall Method</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Identifying the characteristics of high quality traineeships (Smith, Comyn, Brennan Kemmis, and Smith, 2009).</td>
<td>2007-8</td>
<td>Studies of six industry areas, each comprising six specified interviews at industry level and two company case studies (each involving 7 interviewees including 2 apprentices, managers and trainers); 13 high-level policy interviews.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Understanding the psychological contract in apprenticeships/traineeships to improve retention (Smith, Walker, and Brennan Kemmis, 2011).</td>
<td>2009-10</td>
<td>Surveys of apprentices/trainees and employers in two States; nine company case studies (67 case study participants); 12 high-level policy interviews.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: Australian research projects utilized in this paper

There are some limitations to the method in these studies. In Project 2, the selection of the six industry areas could have affected the outcomes of the study, although the areas were selected carefully in conjunction with the project reference group and spanned manufacturing through to service industries. Project 3’s nine company case studies, as with Project 2, represented a range of industry areas and size of company; but were necessarily a small sample. However, the survey, carried out with a large population of apprentices/trainees and employers from two State databases, helped to provide a broader picture. In both projects the inclusion of high-level stakeholder interviews and, in the case of Project 2, industry-level interviewees too, helped to ensure a wider perspective as these interviewees were people with decades of experience in the field, guarding against drawing inappropriate conclusions from the data.

**Findings about good practice**

As explained earlier in this paper, there have been quality-related concerns about traineeships in Australia, following what was at the time perhaps a too-hasty expansion of the system (Smith and Keating, 2003). However Research Project 2 showed a number of high quality practices in Australian companies and training providers which belied the ‘bad press’ received by traineeships. These practices are described below and it was concluded that most could be applied to traditional apprenticeships as well.

For this paper we focus on the findings of the project about good practice in the four phases of the ‘traineeship lifecycle’ — recruitment, sign-up and induction; training delivery and assessment; support during the traineeship; and completion and beyond. The findings are drawn both from the industry case studies, each comprising company examples as well as industry-level interviews, and the high-level national stakeholder interviews. The industry areas that were studied were: financial services, children’s services, asset management (cleaning), construction, retail and meat processing (abattoirs).

The characteristics of a high-quality traineeship that emerged from the data analysis are described below, phase by phase. In the report of Project 2 (Smith, Comyn, Brennan Kemmis and Smith, 2009), characteristics were classified by whether the characteristics were considered necessary, or were ‘ideal’. For reasons of space, only the ‘necessary’ are listed below.
Phase 1 of traineeship: Recruitment, sign-up and induction

Prior to recruitment, the registered training organization and intermediaries learn about the organization’s workplace and business issues and try to ensure that the traineeship adds value to the enterprise as well as to the individual. The registered training organization works with the employer and the supervisor to select the qualification and units of competency for the traineeship, ensuring they are relevant to the enterprise and the future career intentions of the trainee. The qualification provides the potential for advancement to a higher qualification or pathways to other education and training options and is designed to develop occupational loyalty within the trainee.

Once the trainee has been selected, the registered training organization and intermediaries meet with the employer, supervisor and trainee to establish a partnership and provide advice to the enterprise and the trainee. The employer and immediate supervisor demonstrate a strong commitment to the success of the traineeship; the employer clearly regards the traineeship as an investment in their workforce and as a way to attract and retain staff. The employer considers traineeships to be part of the organization’s overall workforce development strategy and is clear about the purpose of traineeships. The trainer, trainee and supervisor are in no doubt about the expected outcomes and processes to be delivered through the traineeship and each party’s relevant responsibilities. All parties are aware of the frequency of contacts from the registered training organization, the means of communication available (SMS, email, phone) and the dispute-resolution processes in place. The employer conducts an induction/orientation session for the new trainee or trainees.

In larger organizations, the human resource team develops comprehensive guidelines for the business units which take on trainees. This team ensures consistent treatment of trainees and safeguards the organization’s training standards. Where possible, a person is given responsibility for managing all trainees in the organization.

Phase 2 of traineeship: Training delivery and assessment

The registered training organization and employer agree on a programme that includes the mixture of on- and off-the-job training that will ensure the highest quality outcomes in the traineeship. The training organization does not impose a single delivery model on the employer but offers a tailored delivery and assessment solution suited to each workplace. The training organization works with the employer to ensure that any in-house employer training is embedded in the traineeship and to provide opportunities for integrating the trainee’s learning and assessment with workplace practices.

The employer ensures that time is set aside for training — on the job, in the workplace or off site. The employer makes sure that the trainee is given opportunities for practice, accepts the likelihood of mistakes and provides skilled and empathetic trainers and supervisors to encourage quality learning experiences. The employer ensures that all worksites operate according to good working practices and conditions, particularly in relation to OH&S, and that good practice is modelled in the workplace to provide a consistent message for the trainee. The employer ensures that the trainee is closely supported by mentors or buddies and that supervisors spend time with trainees to mentor and encourage their learning.

Both the registered training organization and the employer utilize trainers with skills, knowledge and experience of a high standard. They aim for high-quality training that will extend the trainee’s skills and encourage their attachment to the occupation, rather than focusing only on completion. Trainers are enthusiastic about the field of study and keep up with rapidly evolving technology and work practices. The training organization uses high-quality and current learning materials with a strong emphasis on OH&S and relevant to the trainee’s workplace. Both the training organization and employer ensure that training and assessment materials are customised to the specific workplace activities rather than being generic workbooks. Materials are adapted to suit trainees with particular
language, literacy or numeracy needs. Assessment is as holistic as is compatible with rigour and relevant to the workplace, while avoiding over-customization. Underpinning knowledge extending beyond the immediate workplace is delivered.

**Phase 3 of traineeship: Support during the traineeship**

Intermediaries develop good ongoing relations with employers and build trust with managers, supervisors and trainees. They provide accurate, current, and appropriate information. Registered training organization staff undertake frequent visits to ensure on-the-job trainees are satisfied with their learning and their daily work. During visits, training organization staff reinforce the relationships between theory and practice and deal with any employment, motivational or relationship issues, or alert appropriate intermediary staff. For traineeships involving off-the-job training, training organization staff contact employers regularly to discuss the trainee’s progress and ensure that off-the-job training takes account of the type of workplace in which the trainee is located.

Employers and supervisors provide regular and ongoing feedback to trainees. The employer provides a dedicated mentor for the trainee. The mentor meets with the trainee regularly to check and ensure progress through the learning materials and the employer evaluates the mentoring relationship. The training organization, supervisor and trainee participate in an ongoing review process to monitor issues and progress.

**Phase 4 of traineeship: Completion and beyond**

Both training organization and intermediary staff work with the employer, supervisor and trainee in an effective and timely manner to ensure effective completion of the traineeship. They make sure that all assessment tasks are completed and that the trainee feels confident in each area covered. The parties participate in a comprehensive evaluation of the traineeship and review findings collectively to ensure continuous improvement purposes. (Extracted from Smith, Comyn, Brennan Kemmis, and Smith, 2009: 32-34).

Research Project 3 (Smith, Walker, and Brennan Kemmis, 2011) encompassed apprenticeships and traineeships, and focused on the importance of the psychological contract in these contracts of training. The research started with the premise that the success of apprenticeships/traineeships and the satisfaction of the parties (employers and apprentices/trainees) are affected to a considerable extent by the expectations of both parties, their beliefs about their obligations, and the extent to which expectations are met. The research framework for this project drew on psychological contract theory (e.g. Dabos and Rousseau, 2004). In the following discussion, the term ‘apprentices’ is taken to include ‘trainees’ as well.

The project found that expectations of apprenticeships were high on both sides of the employment relationship (i.e. the employer and the apprentice). The survey results showed that compared with previous studies on non-apprenticed occupations (e.g. Hutton and Cummins, 1997) expectations were high and also each party’s expectations of their own obligations was higher. This indicates that there is a need for companies to pay particularly close attention to their management systems for apprentices, compared with other workers.

Case study and survey data alike indicated some good practices that could be adopted more widely to improve the satisfaction of both parties and higher quality outcomes. Employers who retained their apprentices and trainees had instituted sound human resource management procedures including providing extensive information to would-be applicants, instituting performance management systems for apprentices, and devizing early intervention strategies for
‘at-risk’ apprentices. They had clear lines of communication both within the organizations and externally with other parties to the apprenticeship. They provided rewards and recognition for good performance, and paid careful attention to both on and off the job training.

Companies did less well, in their own view, about providing ‘specific time for training’ and ‘a range of training methods’ (these were survey items that companies self-rated lower than other items); but knew that they needed to improve. Improvements in training practices required very close liaison with the relevant registered training organizations, and this sort of dialogue was evident in some of the case studies. The best employers among the case study companies showed active and continuous learning about the management of apprentices and trainees.

Two examples of company case studies are provided below\(^2\). Both companies were heavily involved in the national apprenticeship system, one employing traditional apprentices and one employing trainees. They provide examples of some of the practices mentioned above.

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**Case 1: Power Co**

PowerCo (employing apprentices) was a government-owned electricity distribution corporation in Queensland covering regional and remote areas. PowerCo employed 4,500 people of which 340 were apprentices. At the time of the case study around 75 apprentices were recruited each year from an applicant pool of between 1,200 and 2,000 (including internal applicants). There was a 90% completion rate. Most of PowerCo’s apprentices worked as distribution linesperson/electrical powerline linesperson (about 70% were in this category), systems electricians/electrical fitter mechanics, and communications technicians and completed Certificate III level qualifications. PowerCo was a company with a long and proud tradition of training apprentices. The industry was heavily apprenticed; managers had come up through the ranks. These factors helped to ensure that those responsible generally had a strong commitment to ensuring the apprentices were trained well. The large size of the company assisted in some ways, as apprentices were rotated among departments and sites, but in others created difficulties; apprentices could be provided with a wide range of experiences but on the other hand could get ‘lost’ for a while with a poor supervisor. The company had compensated for the latter problem by setting up a system almost like a Group Training Organisation, appointing geographical area field officers with a caseload of around 50 people and with a quarterly reporting system involving the apprentice and his supervisor/workgroup leader. These practices were extremely resource-intensive but resulted in a high completion and retention rate. The other major features, also made possible by the resources available within the company were a highly selective recruitment procedure involving a number of different steps, and an industrial relations agreement that provided a level of pay for mature-aged apprentices that was likely to attract high-quality applicants.

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**Case 2: RestaurantCo**

RestaurantCo (employing trainees) was a quick-service food company holding a State franchise for fried chicken. The traineeship programme, designed for customer service staff in the stores who completed a Retail Certificate II qualification, had commenced 11 years prior to the research, as a result of collaboration between the Human Resource Manager and an Australian Apprenticeship Centre. Over 1000 people had completed traineeships at RestaurantCo since the programme had commenced; this represented a completion rate of over 90%. The programme was a large-scale human resource strategy that embedded progressive gaining of qualifications within the store-level promotions processes. Originally, the programme was 100% on-the-job, but when that proved ‘a disaster’, a proportion of off-the-job raining was introduced. While the trainees who were
interviewed were satisfied with their traineeships, it was evident from reports of other stores and other trainees that problems could arise when store managers were not fully committed to the programme. Risk was lessened by two major factors: confining entry to the programme to existing workers recommended by store managers and building long-term relationships with the Australian Apprenticeship Centre and the RTO which both played a major part in the programme. The close involvement of the major players in the programme was advantageous to some extent, but could be a problem as the fulfilment of the trainees’ expectations was distributed among those parties, over which the company had no direct control.

This final point in respect of Case 2 illustrates a major finding of the project which was that, to a much greater extent than in ordinary employment contracts, many parties were important in affecting the psychological contract between the individual apprentice and the employing company. Figure 1 illustrates these parties and shows how communication occurred between the external parties as well as between the company or apprentices and the external parties. The training provider (Registered Training Organisation) was integral to the success of the apprenticeship. It was found that the importance of the role of the Australian Apprenticeship Centre varied among companies, and Group Training Organisations were involved in only a proportion of apprenticeships. The other organizations and people which affected the psychological contract — shown in the background of the figure — were not researched directly but were mentioned by many interviewees. For employers, these other influences, both direct and indirect, meant that their apprentices’ satisfaction was affected by many other factors over which they did not have control.

Fig. 1: The interdependent relationships among apprentices/trainees and their employers, RTOs, Australian Apprenticeship Centres, and Group Training Organisations
Meta-Analysis

The meta-analysis for this paper was designed to illustrate the method by which the good practice principles could be used in different countries and in individual companies, and proceeded as follows. Firstly the international principles for a model apprenticeship system (Project 1) were mapped, in a general way, against the Australian system, using a process earlier used for the Indian system (Smith and Brennan Kemmis, 2013) and also subsequently employed by Doran (2015) for the Irish system. Secondly the findings of the two Australian company-level projects (Projects 2 and 3) were mapped against those international principles that related specifically to company-level matters. And finally, the two company case studies were analysed in relation to the Australian findings.

Step 1

In this step, the Australian system, as the site for Projects 2 and 3, was mapped against the international principles for national systems (Table 1), using the domains as sub-headings. The Australian information is taken primarily (with some updating) from Smith (2010) which included a case study of Australia in an entry on apprenticeships in the International Encyclopedia of Education. In this discussion, the term ‘apprenticeship’ is taken to mean ‘traineeship’ as well.

System's coverage of occupations. In Australia apprenticeships are available in all industries and in a range of occupations, particularly those that are typically undertaken by women (generally traineeships) as well as men. However, funding structures at both Federal and State level favour masculinised occupations (Guthrie, Smith, Burt and Every, 2014).

Participation by individuals as apprentices. Apprenticeships are open to people of all genders and ages, and in rural as well as urban locations. There are clear pathways for school-leavers and there are no entry-level qualifications, in most cases, except those that may be required by individual employers. Apprenticeship programmes are well-publicised in schools and on government web sites at both national and State level. There are off-the-job programmes to facilitate entry (‘pre-apprenticeships’, or more generic programmes) but these are not available in all occupations.

Comprehensive national governance structures. There is liaison among agencies responsible for different aspects of the system, as well as liaison between Federal and State agencies. The policy emphasis is on training as well as employment aspects. Qualifications are updated by the relevant Industry Skills Councils and are required to adhere to the Australian Qualifications Framework. State governments collect data from employers and training providers. There is no inherent bias towards particular geographical areas.

Involvement of stakeholders. Major stakeholder groups are routinely consulted in relation to apprenticeship regulations and structure. There is not always a commitment to collaboration among the parties. There is no clear system for adding new occupations to the apprenticeship system. Employers have the opportunity to be involved in development of qualifications through Industry Skills Councils.

Strength of quality systems. Training providers are subject to audit. However, there are well-known quality issues among private training providers which the regulatory body acknowledges are not readily addressed (Harris, 2015). The content of qualifications is readily available on the internet. There is no trade testing at the conclusion of apprenticeship; the system relies on the
training provider assessing to the qualification. There are no requirements for teaching/training qualifications for workplace supervisors of apprentices; and teachers in training providers are enquired only to have a Certificate IV level qualification which is acknowledged as being one of the least-well delivered in the system (Smith, Hodge and Yasukawa, 2015). Employers are not required to undergo any type of vetting to employ apprentices and are not monitored on their performance in training apprenticeships. There are no required supervision ratios (except in a few industrial relations agreements). In some industries, there is extensive communication from employer bodies about apprenticeships.

Simplification of apprenticeship systems. Elements of the system are managed at a State level, but there is increasing harmonisation across State boundaries and only one system. The respective responsibilities of the different parties to apprenticeships are reasonably well-defined, with employer responsibilities least clear. There is no consistency of contract periods, as a relatively new so-called ‘Competency-Based Completion’ system (which is different from the curriculum meaning of competency based training) allows apprentices to complete at any time, subject to being signed off by the employer and the training provider. The latter system is reportedly causing difficulties.

Incentives for participation. There are financial incentives for employers to take on apprentices, and funding for training, although both varies across occupations. Apprentices have employment contracts and a rate of pay that rises each year and on completion. The vast majority of apprentices are retained by their employing companies at the end of their apprenticeship. Apprentices are required to be issued with a training plan. Apprentices are allowed to switch employers, but arrange that themselves unless they are employed by a Group Training Organisation. Apprentices do not necessarily receive any off-the-job training, and may not be offered the chance to experience different workplaces. Employers may receive support through employer associations, but this varies among industries. Employers do not generally receive any advice on workplace curriculum.

This analysis shows that Australia performs reasonably well against some of the eight principles but less well against others. Employer-related issues are the weakest areas of the system. Employers need not be vetted to take on apprentices; their work with apprentices is not monitored; their staff need not be qualified; they need not have appropriate supervision ratios for apprentices; they are not advised on workplace curriculum; and they are not required to offer their apprentices off-the-job training. In addition, Australia fares badly in gender equity in the sense that the system favours masculinised occupations, while there is no direct discrimination against women. Quality of training is also a problem in the system.

Step 2

This step in the analysis maps company-level findings of the two Australian projects (Projects 2 and 3) against the model apprenticeship framework using the two company case studies summarised above. The discussion focuses on the employer-related weaknesses of the Australian system that were identified in Step 1. Both organizations were multi-site and had set up their own systems for trying to maintain quality, that were able to some extent to address some but not all of these deficiencies. Both companies offered off-the-job training. Also, in both companies, a suggested workplace curriculum was developed within the company. Both companies have provided oversight of on-the-job training, via the field officer in the case of PowerCo, and the
RTO in case of RestaurantCo. These people provided a variant of the ‘case manager’ system mentioned in Table 3. PowerCo instituted rules about supervision of apprentices and trainees, in the absence of national requirements. Only PowerCo provided the opportunity to experience different workplaces, although RestaurantCo did allow the chance to mix with trainees from other sites (but only other sites within the company). While there was no system for switching employers in either case, RestaurantCo allowed reversion to a non-trainee status for trainees who decided they did not want to continue with the programme. In both instances, progression to higher-level work on completion of the apprenticeship or traineeship was an integral part of the whole system.

The companies also addressed further shortcomings in the Australian system. They attempted to deal with well-known quality issues among training providers by choosing their providers carefully, and, in the case of RestaurantCo, maintain constant liaison with the RTO. However, neither company addressed the deficiencies in national requirements for teacher qualifications either in the RTO or the company itself. No reference was made by either company to any upskilling programmes for the in-company training staff. Finally, the multiplicity of players within, and also outside the company (in the case of RestaurantCo), which is a feature of apprenticeship systems worldwide, was a challenge in both companies. In both instances, the presence of multiple people with responsibilities for apprentices and trainees helped to ensure that issues did not go unnoticed. On the other hand managers pointed out that sometimes staff avoided responsibility by passing problems onto other departments or personnel, and also that the number of bodies meant that additional monitoring was required.

**Step 3**

In this final step of the analysis, the company case studies were mapped against relevant parts of the overall findings of Projects 2 and 3. This step shows how company’s apprenticeship systems can be benchmarked against national good practice. For both companies, a comparison with Project 2’s characteristics of high-quality traineeships showed clear alignment with the characteristics listed under Phase 1 (recruitment, sign-up and induction). Support during the traineeship (Phase 3) was well-represented in both company case studies, although in both cases it was noted, in different ways, that immediate supervisors did not always give sufficient feedback to the apprentices/trainees. Both companies were focused on completion (Phase 4) and on ensuring the apprentices/trainees were confident in their work. As the apprentices/trainees were expected to move onto senior roles in the companies, this was clearly of importance.

Project 3’s overall findings provide a useful benchmarking for the company case studies. Both companies had comprehensive recruitment and performance management strategies in place, characteristics of good practices found in the project as a whole. PowerCo had early intervention strategies but RestaurantCo did not have any clear procedures for this. Lines of communication were not made entirely clear within the companies, with line managers and those responsible for managing the apprenticeship/traineeship systems both, perhaps inevitably, playing roles whose boundaries could shift according to particular cases. Close liaison with external bodies was a major feature at RestaurantCo but not so much at PowerCo which seemed to be more self-sufficient in its apprenticeship system; the role of the RTO and of the Australian Apprenticeship Centre was barely mentioned at PowerCo.
Conclusions

This paper has described agreed good practice in apprenticeship systems, a ‘model apprenticeship framework, derived from a systematic analysis process across eleven countries. It has illustrated how these principles of good practices could be utilised for benchmarking purposes both at a national level and by companies that employ apprentices. In the case of the article the company-level analysis has been undertaken using previously-completed research projects undertaken by the author.

The three-step analysis process employed in the meta-analysis is not merely a scholarly exercise; it is readily translatable for practitioners. The model apprenticeship framework developed in Project 1 is by no means the only one available for countries’ apprentice governance systems. A CEDEFOP-funded project (Hauschildt and Wittig, 2015) has recently developed a similar framework, albeit only in relation to governance and financing and only derived from European country case studies (n=5), unlike Project 1 in this paper which covers countries in other continents. The CEDEFOP-funded project provides an indication of potential practical application of the model apprenticeship framework. In that project, workshops were held in each country with major national stakeholders where the results for that country are fed back and discussed with a view to system improvement (Hauschildt and Wittig, 2015).

This paper also goes beyond the national policy level. It incorporates analysis of company systems, not only against national good practice, but also against international good practice principles. The analysis undertaken in the paper in Step 2 indicates that there are possibilities for companies to make internal provisions that can help to address deficiencies in national systems. In order to do this, HRD practitioners need to have a good awareness of international policy and practice in apprenticeships. This enables them to identify weaknesses in their countries’ systems which they can address, in a similar manner to Step 1 in the meta-analysis. While this may be particularly important where companies operate across national borders, as it can be done for the multiple international settings, it is also helpful for companies with a purely national focus.

Notes

1 http://www.ellischart.ca
2 Full case study report for these and for the other seven case studies can be found at: http://www.ncver.edu.au/publications/2432.html in “Support Documents”.

References


The Author

Erica Smith holds a Personal Chair in Vocational Education and Training at Federation University Australia. She has published widely, mainly in the area of training policy, apprenticeships and traineeships, enterprise training, and vocational education and training (VET) practitioners. She has previously worked as a human resource manager and in community work; and in a range of roles in the Vocational Education and Training sector.

Erica is co-chair of INAP, the international network for apprenticeship research. She has been invited to advise the Australian and overseas governments and a range of NGOs. Erica also convenes the Australian Council of Deans of Education Vocational Education Group, representing those universities providing VET teacher-education.

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Developing Talent Strategies: Research Based Practice in Oman

Paul Turner, Leeds Business School, UK
Alison Glaister, The York Management School, UK
Rayya Al Amri, University of Bradford School of Management, UK

Organizations struggle to move from the conceptualisation of talent strategies to practical implementation. This paper proposes the use of a talent management evolution matrix which enables the organization to assess and develop the link between the concept and practice of talent management. Gathering data from thirty-nine semi-structured interviews, the matrix is applied in order to understand the differences between the finance and energy sectors in Oman and how they perceive and practice talent management. The findings suggest that Omani talent management practices are shaped strongly by the institutional environment and the nature of business strategy, yet this has resulted in differences between how the finance and energy sectors conceptualize talent management. Despite these differences the findings show that talent management is practiced in similar ways within both the finance and energy sectors, suggesting convergence at the practice level only.

Strategy Driven Talent Management

The achievement of an organization’s business goals will require leaders who do the right things, managers who do things right and an engaged workforce that has the skills and capabilities to perform business functions effectively. In short there will need to be alignment between the organization’s people and its business strategies. Talent management: “the future proofing of an organization’s human capital pool” (Tatoglu et al., 2016: 278), provides a means through which this alignment can be achieved. This paper proposes that a ‘talent management evolution matrix’ is one way in which an organization can identify its current position alongside a range of strategic options that will facilitate the development of a talent strategy. The paper makes a key contribution to an understanding of how talent management can be evaluated in practice and the matrix connects both the conceptual acceptance of talent management and its implementation. Using empirical evidence gathered through thirty-nine semi-structured interviews this paper examines how the talent management evolution matrix can be applied to organizations in the financial and energy sectors in Oman.

The alignment between business goals and the development of strategic capabilities will be determined by the nature of these goals, the timescales within which they are to be achieved; the geographic footprint over which they are spread and the level of innovation or transformation required. These factors will determine the numbers of people, the level of skills and capabilities and will shape organizational culture. Such a response will lead to people policies and practices that are informed by strategic workforce planning — a comprehensive approach to talent where strategic talent management will be complemented by operational talent activity (Collings et al., 2011). In this respect there is increasing pressure to deliver a talent strategy that is aligned qualitatively (knowledge, skills and behaviours) and quantitatively (return on investment in talent, return on investment in human capital) to business objectives.
However, talent management strategy is influenced by both internal and external considerations including the structure of the organization and the institutional context within which it resides. Organizational structures might include the creation of global matrices or networks that replace traditional hierarchies and these are shaped by demographic and behavioural changes of a workforce comprising multi-generational, mobile and information ‘accessed’ workers (Turner and Kalman, 2014). The nature and strength of these internal dynamics will depend upon the markets or sectors in which the organization chooses to compete. External considerations focus on the increasing need for talented people in both knowledge economies and the more traditional sectors. The World Economic Forum (2011) emphasized the need for ‘highly educated people’ to sustain economic growth and anticipated talent shortages by 2020 in 25 countries, 13 industries and 9 occupational clusters. The universality and diversity of these shortages are striking; ranging from significant shortages of those with supply chain skills at junior, middle and senior management level (Dubey and Gunasekaran, 2015); wide ranging shortages in the five economies of China, Singapore, Thailand, Hong Kong and Taiwan (Tatli et al., 2013); skill shortages in science, technology, engineering and mathematics in the USA (Bayer, 2014) as well as shortages in marketing, construction and health professionals in economies around the world. The effect of labour market forces in both contexts is that the excess demand for leadership, managerial, project, specialist and operational talent highlights the attraction and subsequent retention of this talent.

Thus, internal organizational dynamics and how they combine with and respond to external labour market forces suggests that organizations find it difficult to match the demand for talent with the supply of talent. Even when organizations attempt to do so, they are faced with multiple challenges including the initial identification of talent, the means through which talent can be developed and how to manage this talent resource throughout the organization lifecycle. The alignment objective, clearly laid out in the introduction to this paper, becomes less clear once the objectives for talent management move from conceptualization to operationalization.

**Key Constructs of Talent Strategy, Management and Organizational Alignment**

There has been a good deal of research on several of the key constructs of talent strategy and management (Tarique and Schuler, 2010). Guidance on the principles of strategic talent management have been set out (Stahl et al., 2011); and how to mobilize the organization to achieve strategic alignment through talent management and human resource development (HRD) is articulated (Alagaraja, 2013). In addition, research outputs include work on the importance of executive and manager engagement in delivering talent strategy (Anderson, 2009; Bjorkmann et al., 2011); the effectiveness of the tools of talent management (Yarnall, 2011; Scott-Ladd et al., 2010) and some of the measures needed to assess its progress (Yapp, 2009). The differences between twentieth and twenty-first century talent strategy have been noted (Capelli, 2008) and advice exists on how to turn organizations into ‘talent factories’ (Ready and Conger, 2007) for talent management in a new era (Cheese, 2010). Strategy driven talent management (Silzer and Dowell, 2010) is high on both the HRD and corporate agenda, but the evidence of the effectiveness of strategic alignment is mixed (Gibb and Wallace, 2014), explained in part, by the key challenges that organizations face in operationalising a talent management strategy.

The first challenge — defining the meaning of talent and talent management — arises because of the inconsistent definitions of talent at the national, regional or global level leading to contradictions in advice and fragmentation in theory (Tarique and Schuler, 2010). On the
one hand, talent management can be defined as “the systematic attraction, identification, development, engagement/retention and deployment of those individuals with high potential who are of particular value to an organization” (Tansley et al., 2007: xi); or in a global context talent management may be considered as the “activities and processes that involve the systematic identification of key positions which differentially contribute to the organization’s sustainable competitive advantage, the development of a talent pool of high potential and high performing incumbents to fill these roles, and the development of a differentiated human resource architecture to facilitate filling these positions with competent incumbents and to ensure their continued commitment to the organization” (Collings and Mellahi, 2009: 304-313.) Such definitions depend upon the predominant philosophy of the end user and whether they adopt pools, practice, people or positions in their approach to talent management (Collings and Mellahi, 2009; Scullion and Collings, 2010; Sparrow, Scullion, and Tariq, 2014). These approaches hinge on the idiosyncrasies of the operating environment and the opinions of key stakeholders and decision makers (Zhang and Bright, 2012). Such philosophies place the concept of talent on a continuum ranging from an approach which is exclusive, involving only a few people—normally the executive cadre, successors and high potentials, to one that is inclusive where everyone is talented. In a recent study of talent management in multinational companies, Iles et al., (2010) found that the majority adopted an exclusive approach to talent management resulting in integrated and selective human resource management systems. For some, this involved an ‘exclusive-people’ focus on certain groups of high-performing or high-potential people, whilst for others it meant an ‘exclusive-position’ focus on certain key positions in the organization. A minority of organizations had an inclusive approach and a few were more organizationally focused moving towards a social capital perspective (Iles et al., 2010).

The challenge facing HRD and talent management professionals is that, in spite of this continuing debate about the meaning of talent and talent management, there is an expectation from the organization’s executives that those associated with delivering talent management will add value to the achievement of organization goals. For some, the expectation is to become talent factories (Ready and Conger, 2007), ensuring a continuing supply of people to fill key positions. This will require a dual focus, first a focus on functionality (rigorous talent processes that support strategic and cultural objectives) and second, a focus on vitality (the emotional commitment of managers, reflected in daily actions). Yet, for others, the objective of their talent strategy will be operational - to provide replacements or successors to key positions; to attract and retain graduates; to deliver management and leadership development. Both the importance of talent and its effective management are critical success factors (Vaiman et al., 2012) that will be shaped by an organization’s context including the evolution and cultural attributes of the organization and the unique characteristics of the competitive environment.

Therefore, to resolve many of the issues organizations face when developing their talent strategy there is a need to ensure an alignment with their own context. Each organization will have a different starting point from others, as such, a different set of expectations of what is meant by and what is included under the headings of talent strategy and management. Given these differences, organizations will adapt academic insight and practical learning to their own experiences. Despite these differences, strategists and decision makers in the organization need to consider the following issues: how well is talent and talent management understood and supported in the organization? And how effective is the organization at executing talent strategy — i.e. turning the concept into practice?
A Construct for Assessing the Effectiveness of Talent Management — the Talent Management Evolution Matrix

Developing a talent strategy and associated talent management activity will be heavily influenced by both the environment in which the organization operates and the position of that organization in respect of its talent management evolution. It will depend on both the definition of talent and the objectives set within the organization for talent management. Once these have been identified then it will be incumbent on those delivering the strategy to ensure coherence between idea, strategy and execution, an alignment critical to success. As we have described above, coherence and consistency in approach are not always in evidence in the field of talent management.

In response to this and to provide a framework against which a talent strategy can be delivered, a talent management evolution matrix was developed in 2014 and 2015 and subsequently used to facilitate discussions about talent strategy in organizations (Turner, 2015: a and b) across the UK, Europe and the Middle East. The matrix is based on the assumption that there are two important sets of criteria in determining the position of an organization in respect of its talent management (and see also Figure 1). The first is the extent to which talent is understood to be an important consideration in the delivery of an organization’s strategy and the way in which it manages its people; the level of executive and management knowledge and commitment; and the level of resourcing and workforce engagement. These factors form the basis of the first requirement of the talent management evolution matrix i.e. **conceptual acceptance**, which became one of two axes on the matrix. include the extent of agreement on the definition of talent, the extent of agreement on the definition and scope of talent management, the roles and responsibilities of senior executives for talent management, and the measures that are used to monitor the process of talent management.

The second is how well an organization delivers, or is resourced to deliver, its talent management programmes and activities. Coherence in delivery means “the balancing of natural internal competition to get there first or to show more benefits than others against the need to make the idea one that is accepted enthusiastically throughout the organization” (Turner and Kalman, 2014: 131). This is referred to in the talent management evolution matrix as **practical implementation**. Initial dialogue with talent practitioners suggests the need to assess the degree to which talent management and its associated activity are aligned to business goals as well as the level of coordination of actions and policies within and without the talent management function. In addition, there is a need to consider the extent to which talent management roles are delineated and understood amongst people management specialists and their respective organization managers. On this axis, a full suite of well-supported leadership programmes, a wide range of online training options, useful career maps and transparency in opportunity (membership of projects, job moves and so on) would result in a high rating on the scale of practical implementation. Once again, agreement of practical implementation is contextual, will use benchmarking data as ‘evidence’ and will have the support of executives and managers in its determination.

Within the talent management evolution matrix, individual organizations self-assess their position on the conceptual acceptance scale. HRD and talent management professionals can provide evidence of what takes place in other organizations through their own benchmarking and this can provide some kind of talent context in which the discussion about progress can be made. The important assumption is that the process of establishing conceptual acceptance is
Implementation of the Talent Management Evolution Matrix in the Omani Context

Semi structured interviews were conducted with business executives, line managers, talent management professionals and HR generalists in the Omani finance and energy sectors. Each of the organizations reviewed had well-developed systems of talent management crafted against the idiosyncrasies of Oman’s institutional environment.

A particular feature of Oman is its Omanisation policy, a government initiative requiring 90% of positions to be filled with Omani people, suggesting a greater focus on the attraction, retention and development of talent. Social and cultural pressures, perceived career opportunities and the chance for further investment in skills have resulted in a strong inclination to work in the government (public) sector rather than the private sector (Al-Ali, 2006; Al-Lamki, 1998; Budhwar and Mellahi, 2006). Skill shortages have led to increasing competition amongst organizations and even the finance sector faces tough competition from both the government and new banks in attracting and retaining talented local people. This is aggravated by the inability of higher education institutions to train sufficient graduates to meet current and future demand (Supreme Council for Planning, 2012). In summary, the context for talent and talent management in Oman is a complex one that has heightened the competition for talent and therefore the need for a more nuanced and strategic approach to talent management.

Conceptual Acceptance and Talent Management in Oman

The first factor in understanding conceptual acceptance was to identify how organizations in Oman defined talent and whether this definition was accepted and understood organization wide. Our findings show that external, institutional and internal organizational pressures have significant effect on the definition of talent and the shaping of the approach to talent management. Amongst these were government regulation, competition, and the nature of the labour market and the philosophy of the organization.

The effect of these forces on the incidence and the definition of talent was marked. At a macro level, each of these organizations were translating and responding to the Omanisation policy — developing talent management systems to support and increase the employment of a local workforce. On a micro level, those in the finance sector equated talent to those with high potential, an exclusive approach that was people-centred; whilst those in the energy sector regarded talent as those with critical skills — a more role-focused approach and a more inclusive definition of talent management. In the finance sector the exclusive approach focused on the need for leadership skills in response to growing competition. The inclusive approach in the energy sector
was a response to changing business requirements where the production of oil has moved from the primary to the secondary stage, a complexity that requires a technically skilled workforce.

Conceptual acceptance is also driven by a long-term focus in both sectors and an emphasis on business sustainability. Talent management was increasingly used for succession planning purposes, in order to produce a sufficient pool of competent and knowledgeable employees at different managerial levels. However, business sustainability in operational terms also led to a consideration of broader corporate social responsibilities including a conscious reduction in Oman’s unemployment rate, the development of local people who are able to access more stable careers and therefore influence competitiveness at a national level. Thus in Oman, talent management is not only driven by business need but a sense of responsibility to the country as a whole.

The findings indicate that ‘talent’ is a dynamic concept that is defined according to the internal and external operating pressures of the organization. They also indicate that strong external (political and labour market) pressures have created a demand from organizations for a strategic focus on talent. Therefore, the finance and energy sectors in Oman show a relatively high level of conceptual acceptance of talent management.

**Practical Implementation in Talent Management in Oman**

Definitions of talent management shape the operationalisation of talent management practices. Yet, while the broader conceptualizations of talent management differed (more exclusive in the finance sector and more inclusive in the energy sector), in practice, both sectors adopted hybrid approaches through a differentiated talent management architecture that included all Omani workers. Through a range of assessment measures employees were offered a diverse range of training and development opportunities. In this way it was possible to allocate what was perceived as the right ‘talent’ to the right development opportunity. This is a major consideration when looking at the second axis of the talent management evolution grid i.e. practical implementation. This approach enabled the development of specific talent management practices that were related directly to higher level positions, but other talent management practices focused on all Omani employees (to comply with Omanisation policy), ensuring an effective means through which talent could be deployed to different positions while at the same time adhering to a culture of fairness within the workforce.

In this approach to talent management, the identification stage is critical. This is consistent with other research on the area and is an important stage for ensuring that the right talent is allocated to the right position (McDonnell, 2011). Thus, organizations use different assessments including tests for reasoning ability, interviews, consideration of work experience and qualifications in order to allocate each employee to the right level.

Practices also included:

- Competency frameworks for different layers of the organization.
- Assessment centres using psychometric testing, interviews and case-studies. While it is expected that assessment criteria will differ according to the specific characteristics of the organization, both sectors considered age, nationality, experience and performance,
highlighting the interplay between government regulation and organizational need.

- Learning and development opportunities for those identified as high potential (exclusivity).
- Training programmes to address the critical skills and abilities of the wider workforce (inclusivity).
- Combining assessment criteria with structured feedback to enhance the employees’ skills and place them in the right positions.
- Using coaching and mentoring for both the management and development of talent — most line managers and talented employees in the finance and petroleum sector organizations believed in the importance of coaching and mentoring as an effective way of managing and developing, a point recognized as an important contributor to the effectiveness of talent management (Bjorkman et al., 2011).
- Structured career paths aligned to development plans.

In both the finance and energy sectors, practical implementation (the second axis on the talent management evolution matrix) is relatively high. A wide range of tools and processes were in place and these were effectively implemented. It is evident that the finance and energy sectors understand the importance of talent management in identifying the right person through specific objective criteria rather than through subjective measures. The use of selection and assessment criteria in managing and developing talent suggests that the organizations have a structured scientific approach to identifying and developing talent that shape the development and deployment of a differentiated talent management architecture. The result is the increasing maturity of talent management practices and systems that are able to respond to the needs of both the organization and the country as a whole.

An initial assessment of the position of organizations in the finance and energy sectors in Oman suggests that both have strengths in the areas of conceptual acceptance and practical implementation of talent management:

- In the finance sector, a high level of conceptual acceptance is demonstrated through well-developed systems and processes for the identification of high potential signifying an exclusive approach with an emphasis on resourcing leadership positions. Furthermore, talent management is a critical part of the succession planning process.
- In the energy sector, on the other hand, conceptual acceptance is based on a more inclusive approach to talent management determined largely by the need to resource areas of critical skill driven by changing business requirements. There is recognition in the sector of the need for an effective talent strategy which takes a different perspective to that of dealing with high potentials and succession management processes. In this respect talent management is seen as part of a broader resourcing strategy.
- There is common ground on conceptual acceptance in both sectors, including a long term perspective on the subject of talent; recognition of the strategic value of talent to competitive positioning and an understanding of the economic benefits of talent management such as reducing unemployment and improving the economic sustainability of the economy.
Both the finance and energy sectors have demonstrated effectiveness in several aspects in practical implementation including:

- There are differentiated talent management architectures to support the particular approach taken by organizations within the sector.
- A wide range of development opportunities tailored to individual positioning.
- The extensive use of tests and structured feedback to enable individual development plans to be put in place.
- A growing emphasis on coaching and mentoring to support the talent management process.

An evaluation of conceptual acceptance and practical implementation in the finance and energy sectors in Oman suggests that both have maturing positions in the former and well-crafted systems and processes in the latter. In this respect there is little difference in their respective placement. Figure 1 shows the possible position of the sectors on the talent management evolution matrix.

Conceptual Acceptance

- Agreed definition of talent throughout the organization.
- Executive level ‘buy in’ to the concept of talent management.
- Clearly defined objectives for talent initiatives and talent management aligned to business objectives.

Practical Implementation

- Assessments and measures for talent management in place.
- Well-crafted implementation plans.
- A wide range of ‘tools of talent’.
- Talent development aligned to competency frameworks.

Figure 1 The Talent Management Evolution Matrix — organizations in the Finance and Energy Sectors in Oman

**Discussion and Conclusion**

This paper proposed that the talent management evolution matrix is one way in which an organization can identify its current position alongside a range of strategic options that will facilitate the development of a talent strategy. The paper makes a key contribution to an understanding of how talent management can be evaluated in practice and the matrix connects
both the conceptual acceptance of talent management and its practical implementation. Using empirical evidence gathered through thirty-nine semi-structured interviews this paper examined how the talent management evolution matrix can be applied to organizations in the finance and energy sectors in Oman.

The findings highlighted key differences between the sectors, with the finance sector embracing the talent management concept more fully with clear links to a succession management strategy. This was due, in part, to a more exclusive focus on leadership development. Companies in the energy sector, on the other hand, had a less-developed idea about how to incorporate and integrate the talent management concept, which focused predominantly on the skills needs of the business rather than the broader workforce planning issues. However, while there were differences in the extent to which these sectors appeared to conceptualize talent management, there were also similarities. The talent management concept was considered a long-term perspective, responding to the broader context of the organization — a response to competitive positioning and an understanding of the economic benefits made possible through a talent management approach. While an understanding of the talent management concept differed between the two sectors, there was little variation in the practical implementation of talent management and practices were mirrored between the sectors.

There are several implications of these findings for Omani companies. The first is that while talent management as a concept is driven by Oman’s institutional environment, organizations should not rely on these pressures to encourage a focus on long-term sustainability in terms of how they consider the concept of talent management and its subsequent practices. Talent management both as a concept and a practice needs to reflect the strategies of the organization and what it considers to be its core competence. Talent management should be embedded within the DNA of the organization regardless of government policy. Second, talent management practices need to be fit for purpose and require configurational alignment between economic exigencies, business strategies and human resource management strategies and practices (of which talent management is a part). It is important to remember that talent management acts as an important signal to all of its stakeholders and is central to the psychological contract (Martin and Cerdin, 2014). Positive signals are imperative if organizations are to manage the expectations of the workforce, capture new talent and foster positive perceptions within the external community. Third, the focus on age as a criterion to define who is considered to be talented is somewhat dangerous and the talent management process needs to address more clearly issues of parity, transparency and equity. Talent management should be considered more than the identification of a younger group of individuals who can progress through key positions and needs to be focused on facilitating and developing knowledge transfer networks within the organization. Finally, the focusing of talent management on Omanis in a bid to reduce the reliance on expatriates is also dangerous as the expatriate workforce is considered to be highly skilled and therefore central to the sustainable competitive advantage of the organization. The exclusion of this group of expatriates from the talent management lifecycle could result in the breakdown of relations and the withholding of vital skills.

From a practice perspective, Omani organizations should consider further investment in multi-source assessments that will encourage more diversity and reduce the potential for bias and the use and investment in one’s own personal network. Further, organizations should consider a more developed use of coaching and mentoring, both on a formal and informal basis as this will assist the retention of key talents but also foster a more open culture, developing attitudes, behaviours
and competencies that are aligned to the concept of talent management. Talent managers should engage with educational establishments and foster links encouraging dialogue in the design of new curricula and teaching practice.

By separating the conceptualization of talent management and the operationalization of talent management – the talent management evolution matrix is a valuable tool for HRD and talent management practitioners. It facilitates the talent management logic. First, it enables practitioners to make the connection between how the organization views its competitive positioning, its relationship with the institutional environment and internal and external stakeholders and its core competence. While organizations differ in terms of maturity, size, sector, market, lifecycle, practitioners will also need to be mindful of (and potentially question) the cultural lens through which they are observing each of these factors. Second, it encourages practitioners to consider the practices that can respond to these factors. The talent management evolution matrix transforms a potentially fragmented and opaque exercise into a more strategic, cohesive and transparent management process.

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**The Authors**

Paul Turner is Professor of Management Practice at Leeds Business School and has held Professorial positions at Universities in Birmingham, Cambridge and Nottingham. He was
previously President (EMEA), Convergys, Group HR Business Director, Lloyds TSB and Vice President, CIPD. He has held Executive and Non-Executive positions with organizations in Europe, the USA and Asia. Paul has Chaired HR and Talent Conferences throughout the world; was a judge on European and Middle East HR Excellence and CIPD People Management Awards and is the author or co-author of Make Your People Before You Make Your Products (Wiley, 2014), Workforce Planning (CIPD, 2010), The Admirable Company (Profile, 2008), Talent-Strategy, Management and Measurement (CIPD, 2007), Organisational Communication (CIPD, 2003) and HR Forecasting and Planning (CIPD, 2002). He has written articles for business and academic journals and the International Press.

Dr Alison J. Glaister is Lecturer in Strategic Human Resource Management at The York Management School, University of York. She has previously held lectureships at Bradford University School of Management and Aston Business School. Alison’s research focuses on international HRM and includes the conceptualisation and operationalisation of talent management strategies and the impact of outsourcing and organizational networks on the role of HR and the employees they serve. She has published in the Journal of World Business, Human Resource Management Journal, Management International Review and International Journal of Human Resource Management.

Rayya Al-Amri is a PhD student at the School of Management, University of Bradford; Rayya’s research focuses on exploring talent management phenomenon in the developing country. She has also been a senior lecturer in HRM at the Higher College of Technology in the Sultanate of Oman since 2006. Rayya has presented papers on Talent Management in international conferences in UK and Europe; e.g. third TM workshop in Berlin 2014, fourth TM workshop in Spain, and BAM conference 2015, UK.
This paper explores a team-based knowledge sharing framework as a structured approach to addressing complex work-related challenges through the sharing of knowledge drawn from concrete experiences. Knowledge sharing is constructed through individual narratives that serve as the basis for collective sensemaking. In turn, interpretation of the problem at hand and articulation of related past experiences help develop reflective inquiry and dynamic feedback increasing team learning. When individuals select their frames of references to construct their narratives, they also unlock their tacit knowledge about past successful experiences or practices. Through collective sensemaking, team members develop critical change behaviours that lead to knowledge experimentation modifying their action patterns. Through an exploratory research design involving qualitative feedback analysis, semi-structured interviewing, and ethnographic participation in a Saudi Arabian multinational company, the study found that the framework promotes team learning in both formal and informal contexts. Not only do individuals begin to view organizational change differently, they also engage more actively in people conversations, collaboration, empowerment, and decision making resulting in specific organizational outcomes. The paper offers implications for human resource development (HRD) practice and research.

Introduction

Current turbulent times require that organizations remain agile and adaptive in sustaining their competitive advantage. Being agile and adaptive is challenging for organizations seeking change. In order to survive, organizations need to have the ability to learn in order to improve their performance through critical knowledge and insight (Fiol and Lyles, 1985). However, organizations cannot learn on their own; their ability to learn is contingent upon their teams’ ability to learn (Edmondson, 2002). Teams are therefore expected to develop knowledge and skills that can be translated into practice within and across contexts, such as cross-functional and cross-boundary teams (Argote, 1999). Traditionally, teams have been conceptualized as work groups that share common objectives to accomplish specific tasks, including product development, sales, and service delivery teams (Hackman, 1987). In more recent literature, cross-boundary teams have been explored in the context of interdependent task structures requiring complex learning and coordination for accomplishing multilevel tasks (Schippers, Edmondson, and West, 2014). As team structure and composition become less permanent, teams also function in more resilient ways as they seek alternative means of learning through knowledge utilization (Bresman and Zellmer-Bruhn, 2013).

In this paper, we will focus on the implementation of a team-based knowledge sharing framework in Saudi Aramco, a large multinational company based in Dhahran, the eastern province of Saudi Arabia. In 2020, Saudi Aramco’s strategic intent is to be the world’s leading integrated energy and chemical company. This will be achieved by maximizing value creation,
facilitating the sustainable expansion of Saudi Arabia’s economy, and enabling a vibrant Saudi energy sector. To achieve this ambitious vision, the company has implemented the Accelerated Transformation Program (ATP). The ATP is a journey of transformation and renewal with the company’s workforce playing a critical role in its success. Against the backdrop of the ATP, the company’s workforce is undergoing unprecedented growth and change. Generation Y employees are replacing a highly experienced generation of older employees. As the ATP continues to be implemented, knowledge sharing is increasingly recognized as an important vehicle supporting company goals. The implementation of team-based knowledge sharing offers Saudi Aramco and its employees a forum for the exchange of knowledge and skills across generations, nationalities, and fields of work.

**Purpose statement**

Although team learning processes are related to knowledge acquisition and transfer to some extent, theoretical linkages between knowledge utilization and team learning have not been firmly established. In some studies, knowledge is viewed as a resource to improve team communication and coordination in order to accomplish certain tasks (e.g. Sole and Edmondson, 2002). In other studies, knowledge is associated with transactive memory systems where shared knowledge is embedded in the “minds” of teams to master particular tasks (e.g. Ren, Carley and Argote, 2006). This perspective is built on the assumption that knowledge does demonstrate unique properties and can therefore be specialized. Because contexts can shape learning, the way knowledge is shared and used in practice within and across teams could offer a different understanding of team learning. In this study, we explored team learning from the knowledge utilization perspective in Saudi Aramco. Through a longitudinal study, we examined how ten teams across six business areas with over 120 members engaged in knowledge sharing. These teams are structured and organized around the mechanisms of a team-based knowledge sharing framework. To guide the purpose of inquiry for this study, we raise the following research question: *How is learning perceived as occurring through team-based knowledge sharing in Saudi Aramco?*

**Context of the study**

Saudi Aramco’s strategic 2020 vision is to increase its organizational learning capacity by unleashing human potential through four critical change behaviours: people conversations, collaboration, empowerment, and decision making. The behaviours were identified following a comprehensive study led by both internal and external experts, and have been shown to support and enable complex change in global organizations. Team-based knowledge sharing builds on the behavioural programme to help the company achieve its long-term strategy. In the context of a rapidly changing workforce, there is urgency for retiring employees to share their tacit knowledge with other employees before they leave the organization. Demographic shifts in the workforce also offer the opportunity for team-based knowledge sharing as a cross-generational and cross-occupational learning interface. The aim is to bridge generational gaps by engaging employees in these critical behaviours. Each of the four behaviours is governed by five corporate values: excellence, accountability, integrity, citizenship, and safety. The strategic vision is further driven by the organization’s ATP aimed at leveraging its human capital to develop an agile workforce through a series of HRD interventions, including talent development and employee engagement. In cultivating a culture of learning and change, Saudi Aramco has engaged in team-based knowledge sharing since 2012. The aim is to develop a network of learning and practices across all levels, increasing the employees’ capacity to learn continuously, rapidly, and adaptively.
Team-based knowledge sharing allows employees to regularly meet together on a volunteer basis in small groups to share individual “best practices” and lessons learned, which are driven by complex and urgent work challenges for which there are no easy solutions. The process of knowledge sharing is facilitated by individual storytelling of direct experiences related to a particular work-related issue. Personal narratives form the core of knowledge interpretation and exploration based on the intersection of individual experiences which may or may not be familiar to members of the same team. The Saudi Aramco framework is built on a structured approach to knowledge sharing largely facilitated by a team leader or coordinator. It works primarily by means of face-to-face interaction in teams of no more than 12 members each in order to take learning to a much deeper and reflective level.

This article will provide the theoretical underpinnings of the framework, describe its practical implementation, and highlight its organizational outcomes. It will also outline some limitations to the study, highlight its implications for HRD, and note some suggestions for future research.

A Team-Based Knowledge Sharing Framework

Based on theoretical and empirical research (Yeo, 2006; Yeo and Marquardt, 2015), the framework is a unique approach to learning in that it is both a structured and spontaneous knowledge sharing process. As a continuous process of learning and knowledge experimentation, the framework operates by means of a prior learning (input), during learning (process), and post learning (output) continuum driven by a work-related problem, referred to as a “challenge statement” (see Fig. 1).

As a process-driven framework, it is built on an integrative theoretical perspective based on David Kolb’s (1984) experiential learning, Reg Revans’ (1982) action learning, and Chris Argyris’ (1982) theory of action. It promotes reflective practice (Schön, 1983) where individuals engage in cognitive participation through reflection, feedback, and dialogue not only to question assumptions but also to challenge the coproduction of actions that constitute practice affecting organizational learning. Knowledge sharing teams function in many respects like action learning sets where people gather in small groups voluntarily to share ideas with each other without the need of an expert. Revans referred to such groups as “comrades in adversity” (Cunningham, 2003: 4) as they learned from each other’s experience. The underlying premise is that groups have the ability to awaken their quest for new knowledge by questioning their own assumptions, practices, and routines. Questioning allows group members to create and modify their frames of references as they make sense of their existing conditions by drawing on their past experiences (Fox, 1997). In other words, team-based knowledge sharing looks beyond causality and seeks to disintegrate complex problems to provide opportunities for members to engage in dialogue, feedback, and reflection as a collaborative inquiry (Marquardt, 2011).
The learning of teams begins when members construct meanings around their surroundings to help them make sense of and reflect on specific organizational challenges for subsequent action-taking (Weick, 1995). Self-reflection is further supported by socio-cognitive inquiry (group reflection) where team members relate past concrete experiences to their perceived and lived experiences based on the shared understanding of existing challenges (Mezirow, 1990). Learning deepens through double feedback loops and reflexive understanding of the internal and external environment where team members formulate individual conceptual schemas for further experimentation (Simpson, French and Vince, 2000). With reference to Figure 1, double-loop learning occurs in the “process” stage between “sharing of experiences and resources” and “consolidation of ideas”, during which ideas and assumptions are challenged through discursive questioning and feedback (Argyris, 1982). Interactions in feedback giving help members become more aware of their internal maps, changing the manner in which they view particular work challenges. When ideas are consolidated, the team then moves towards idea experimentation by developing appropriate actions to change existing conditions (Coghlan and Coughlan, 2015; Kolb, 1984).

<table>
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<th>Dimensions</th>
<th>Team-Based Knowledge Sharing</th>
<th>Action Learning</th>
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| Enablers of Learning | • Driven by specific challenge statements agreed by members as a stimulus for knowledge transfer.  
  • Questioning and feedback.  
  • Appropriate inquiry and motivation of volunteer members. | • Driven by complex and urgent problems.  
  • Questions and reflection.  
  • Appropriate mindset, value, and attitude of action learning members. |
| Occurrence of Learning | • Reflection demonstrated in the sharing of experience that forms the core of knowledge base and an integral part of meeting structure.  
  • Integration of learning into work practices and workplace applications. | • Solutions presented at the right level of influence and authority for appropriate action taking.  
  • Integration of learning into action learning projects. |
| Member Roles        | • Facilitated by a coordinator to draw out key learning experiences of members.  
  • Cross-generational groupings of volunteers to maximize knowledge transfer in an organizational development context. | • Facilitation of discussion by a set advisor or coach.  
  • Diversity of action learning teams.  
  • Commitment of top leadership to the use of action learning.  
  • Support of a problem sponsor. |

Table 1: Comparison between Team-Based Knowledge Sharing and Action Learning

In summary, we present a comparison between the team-based knowledge sharing framework and action learning in Table 1 (adapted from Yeo and Marquardt, 2015). Although the two learning processes appear similar, there are some fundamental differences. For instance, knowledge sharing in Saudi Aramco is driven by volunteer teams not particularly supported by a problem sponsor as found in action learning teams. A key feature of the team-based knowledge sharing framework is that team composition is largely based on cross-generational groupings to ensure optimal knowledge transfer between employees in meeting job-specific needs. In contrast, action learning teams largely involve project or work teams that seek direct solutions for addressing complex and urgent problems critical to the problem sponsors. A more salient difference between the two processes is the potential outcome of team learning. While the Saudi Aramco framework focuses on the integration of learning into daily work practices and workplace applications, action
learning aims to develop specific solutions that meet particular organizational needs. Despite the differences, both learning processes are problem-driven and aim to promote collaborative inquiry through deep questioning, double-loop feedback, and critical reflection.

Practical Dimension of the Framework

In this section, we further explicate the practical dimension of the Saudi Aramco knowledge sharing framework (Fig. 1) by describing the significance of each phase: input, process, and output.

Prior learning: Input

A challenge statement is motivated by a work-related issue which serves as a stimulus for change. Often framed as a question, it captures the focal points of the problem complexity, allowing team members the scope to interpret the problem and uncover commonalities and differences in their thinking and perception of the problem. It promotes inquiry rather than mere discussion and moves the team towards shared understanding. It is chosen collectively by team members prior to the knowledge sharing session. As members begin to interpret the challenge statement, they engage in a deeper level of understanding of the issues involved. In Saudi Aramco, the challenge statements often revolve around issues such as work processes, team cohesiveness, interpersonal communication, customer relations, learning strategies, and change management. These issues affect task interdependence, formal and informal networks, as well as organizational routines and norms.

To address the varying facets of workplace challenges, statements are often constructed as two- or three-pronged questions. For example, “How can we plan and implement communications that will effectively engage our employees to ensure their buy-in on HR-related initiatives/programmes?” formulates the question in such a way that participants are invited to not only share experiences regarding employee engagement, but also to consider how participants might best implement possible solutions. In this regard, challenge statements invite inquiry into both the conceptual and practical aspects of the topic.

Two further illustrations follow. The first is captured in the question “What is good customer service and how can we make it an effective and efficient tool for better performance and results?” and which invites sensemaking, as ideas and experience intersect, allowing members to formulate a loose idea of what “customer service” means to them as a community. In the question, each participant is also asked to consider how the emerging, collective idea of “customer service” could be leveraged to make the organization more impactful and productive in light of the diverse experience of the group. A second illustration is the question: “What techniques can we develop to help new hires absorb organizational culture and become more quickly integrated into their new working environment?” This statement addresses both a new hire’s awareness of the corporate environment and its culture, but also assimilation into this culture. Such carefully constructed questions discourage simplistic, right/wrong analysis of the challenge and one another’s related experience, and promotes a more holistic approach, whose focus is more on discovery than prescription.

During learning: Process

The core of the session is the sharing of concrete experiences specific to the challenge statement uncovering tacit knowledge. Narratives usually revolve around how individuals solve specific
problems or make strategic decisions. In Saudi Aramco, team-based knowledge sharing is facilitated by a coordinator and supported by a scribe who captures the main ideas, which are based on specific experiences articulated through personal narratives and relate to a particular practice.

The facilitator further draws out deeper meanings and facilitates dialogue between members through questioning and feedback. The deeper meanings emerging from this dialogue reflect members understanding of the challenge statement and are then captured by the scribe on flipcharts or display screens as codified tacit knowledge to be deposited in a central repository for storage and wider access. Team members are also required to share a knowledge resource, particularly materials they have read and of relevance to the work challenge in question, such as journal articles, books, reports, brochures, and video links. Individual insights gleaned from such materials, when shared openly, will further serve as codified explicit knowledge as main ideas are also recorded on flipcharts or display screens and subsequently stored. Each team typically meets quarterly during office hours in their workplaces for about 90 minutes each.

**Post learning: Output**

The knowledge shared is subsequently experimented individually or collaboratively in practice. The transfer of knowledge to practice facilitates organizational change through work improvement processes. In Saudi Aramco, team members are encouraged to develop a workplace application as part of their learning outcomes. Collectively, the team works towards developing an action plan for implementation which will be endorsed and/or sponsored by senior management. Sponsorship refers to specific resources such as financial budget, training, and employee involvement which are factored in by the department for the implementation of any approved workplace applications. As more and more teams are established across the corporate framework, workplace applications addressing dominant organizational issues will also increase, providing recommendations for consideration of corporate-wide policies. This is one avenue for knowledge application to be institutionalized in order to benefit the wider community.

**Summary of team-based knowledge sharing**

Team-based knowledge sharing is a framework for connecting employees who wish to share, on a voluntary basis, their knowledge and experiences and seek to learn from the mistakes, challenges and strategies of others. In team-based knowledge sharing, participants share a common commitment to change and experimentation. Structured and process driven, the team interprets and reflects on a challenge statement relevant to its work and organization. The focus and emphasis of dialogue is the challenge statement, often a question commencing with the word “How”. The statement or question focuses on improvement and not a particular problem. The acquired knowledge and experiences of the team members are used to change and/or sustain effective practice.

Team composition is crucial for the successful implementation of the framework. In Saudi Aramco, teams are established through cross-generational or cross-occupational groupings to ensure purposeful knowledge sharing for the bridging of particular knowledge gaps (Argote, Gruenfeld, and Naquin, 2001; Bechky, 2003). A striking feature in the Saudi Aramco teams is member roles, where knowledge sharing is facilitated by an individual, also the team coordinator, through questioning and feedback, drawing out critical lessons learned from all
members. Although members of any knowledge sharing team could potentially change through time, there is some sustainability in key position holders such as team coordinator, scribe, and resource coordinator, who will in turn help ensure stabilization of team membership. Thoughtful facilitation through face-to-face dialogue and reflection leads participants to make sense of individual narratives shared before co-constructing a collective narrative to address a specific challenge statement (Weick, Sutcliffe, and Obstfeld, 2005). All output is valued, captured, and shared in a systemic way by the scribe and archived. Table 2 summarizes the specific features of team-based knowledge sharing in Saudi Aramco.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Structure</th>
<th>Key Characteristics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Input</td>
<td>Sessions are driven by practical challenges rather than problems requiring solutions. Reflection is a key component of the session.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Process</td>
<td>Sessions are facilitated, not led, i.e. a trained facilitator is required. Sessions are based on a specific structure of learning. Professionals share experiences and knowledge around challenging issues.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Output</td>
<td>Team tests out new ideas in practice. Team has an infinite life with revolving topics to meet needs of employees.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: Characteristics of the Team-Based Knowledge Sharing Structure

**Team-Based Knowledge Sharing Implementation**

Developing team-based knowledge sharing is a dynamic process which involves a variety of employees in the organization. First, the team establishes contact with prospective business organizations within Saudi Aramco and invites key decision makers and their employees to attend a briefing session about the initiative. At the end of the session, an invitation is given for volunteers to form a knowledge sharing team including the appointment of primary position holders, including a scribe and a resource coordinator. As mentioned, the scribe captures the best practices and other knowledge and ideas that emanate from the discussion. The resource coordinator stores the scribe’s notes as well as electronic copies of all resources in a shared folder, which serves as a repository of knowledge for the entire organization.

Second, the team coordinator receives formal facilitation training from the second author in order to understand the framework at a deep enough level to preserve its structure and format within the team going forward. Soon after the facilitator’s training, the coordinator schedules the first meeting of the team. The second author, also the coach, attends all meetings and participates on various levels, but always takes detailed notes on the team coordinator’s facilitation skills, and holds a review meeting to share detailed feedback with the coordinator in a spirit of continuous improvement.

Third, the entire process from manager’s orientation to the first meeting can be as short as two weeks or as long as two months. Getting people together voluntarily outside their main work responsibilities is challenging and offers lessons in coordination and advanced communication strategies. But once the team has its first meeting and the facilitator is trained up, the value of learning is evident and the interest in knowledge sharing is usually very strong for the second meeting. Team members are excited about getting back to the safe place of open sharing which team-based knowledge sharing offers.
During the implementation barriers and opportunities can be encountered. Most barriers are of a logistical nature such as finalizing meeting venues and schedules. Getting everyone together on a particular date and ensuring a majority attends the meeting requires finesse on the part of every team coordinator. However, employees are already aware of the importance of sharing their workplace ideas and experience. As employees retire, leaving critical roles to be filled, there is a need from within the organization for tacit knowledge to be shared so that undocumented expertise is passed on and preserved. With the concept of team-based knowledge sharing established and explained as a key HRD practice in Saudi Aramco, we turn now to the research question at the heart of this paper: “How is learning perceived as occurring through team-based knowledge sharing in Saudi Aramco?”

Methodology

We undertook a multi-pronged approach to gathering different sources of data through a variety of qualitative methods in order to address the research question. The aim was to explore the teams’ direct and indirect experience of knowledge sharing as well as their learning and application both within and beyond the work context as perceived by the participants (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). The study was longitudinal in nature. We started gathering the data in 2012, culminating in a more formalized approach lasting nine months in 2015. Earlier data collection involved unobtrusive observations in knowledge sharing activities and informal conversations with participants. However, in 2015 we conducted an online survey which was distributed to over 120 members to capture qualitative feedback through open-ended questions, of which 57 complete responses were received.

We also conducted 22 interviews with members of 10 teams, each lasting on average 45 minutes. The sampling frame for the selection of interviewees was random with three boundary conditions, including gender, functional, and tenure distribution (Creswell, 1994) in order to ensure a cross-section of the employees in Saudi Aramco (and illustrated in Table 3). We were also careful to ensure that the interviewees represent a diverse mix of nationalities including Saudi Arabs, regional Arabs, and expatriates. We further observed and participated in 15 knowledge sharing sessions each lasting an average of 90 minutes capturing first-hand ethnographic data on team participation and learning dynamics. From a longitudinal perspective, we engaged in numerous informal conversations with various stakeholders such as employees, supervisors, and department managers to gain both internal and external views about team-based knowledge sharing.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Job Function</th>
<th>Interviewee Code</th>
<th>(N=Interviews)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Financial Accounting</td>
<td>R1-R3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional Learning</td>
<td>R4-R7</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic Planning</td>
<td>R8-R9</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General Educational Partnerships</td>
<td>R10-R11</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research and Development</td>
<td>R12-R15</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Human Resource Systems Support</td>
<td>R16-R18</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Power Systems Engineering</td>
<td>R19-R20</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personnel Services</td>
<td>R21-R22</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3: Interview Sample
In tandem, the overall data was triangulated by a variety of supporting materials ranging from meeting minutes to internal documents such as reports, emails, and intranet information. The rich qualitative data underwent content analysis where emerging themes were identified through pattern matching of anecdotal accounts (Miles and Huberman, 1994). As part of the exploratory research, analytic rigor was of critical importance to us as we employed an ongoing comparative technique to help us make sense of the overall data through theoretical sampling (Glaser and Strauss, 1967).

In terms of coding, terms or phrases used by the informants were employed that gave rise to categories of meanings based on Miles and Huberman’s (1984) categorization and thematic-identification techniques. The data were first coded using broad categories and more specific categories based on the interview questions including predetermined and improvised probes. The data was shared amongst the authors to eliminate potential coder biases. We first examined the raw data of the transcribed interviews as a team, gaining a sense of the overall meaning of the data. We then each made further sense of the messy data by identifying salient themes and patterns independently through the specific experiences of the informants (Guba and Lincoln, 1994). Because of our direct involvement in many of the teams, we were able to recognize the characteristics of team behaviour and potential learning occurrences based on their references to particular challenge statements, individual stories, and suggested action plans. We subsequently met as a team on several occasions to identify similarities and discrepancies of our interpretation of the data. Observational and archival data, at this point, served as confirmatory evidence for pattern matching based on salient themes (Patton, 2002). When these themes were interpreted by relating them back to the literature, we were able to develop an integrated perspective of data arriving at a clearer set of collective responses (Krippendorf, 1980). Overall, this iterative process between coder interpretations as well as primary and triangulated data helped us to identify and refine the conceptual patterns that offered significant insights into the research inquiry.

**Influences of Knowledge Sharing on Organizational Outcomes**

Team-based knowledge sharing has contributed to an increase in the knowledge capital of Saudi Aramco on an ongoing basis. Both the primary and triangulated data suggest five main areas of influence as a result of implementing the framework: developing competence, managing expectations, harmonizing silos, facilitating cultural change, transforming knowledge boundaries, and developing reflective practice. In particular, while the survey data gave rise to the identification of specific competencies and outcomes as a result of knowledge sharing, the interview data offered insights into HRD practices and contributed to the illustrations exemplified in this paper. The findings in response to the research question are next discussed.

**Developing competencies**

At the individual level, team members developed reflective listening skills in an environment that promotes people conversations. The respondents indicated that they were able to step back and listen to others and this helped them increase their self-awareness. They felt that they could influence others more effectively by internalizing the perspectives of others. In turn, they increased their identification of self in the context of diverse others, leading to better interpersonal relations and social competence. Such competence also led to better teamwork and collaborative efforts,
evident in Saudi Aramco’s cross-divisional knowledge sharing teams where cross-boundary functional ties were forged, as exemplified in the following interview extract:

This indeed is[a] new concept for me ... [A] useful platform is made available to exchange ideas ... [share] views and learn from [different] experiences. Analysis of the experiences could improve individual development. Confidence enhancement among team members ... [helps us to] accomplish tasks more professionally. (R15)

Our data also suggested the development of several other competencies as a result of team-based knowledge sharing. First, individuals engaged in wider and deeper sensemaking as they learned to interpret complex work-related issues while challenging their mental models through feedback and dialogue. Individuals also enhanced their communication skills as they learned to articulate their personal narratives at a level persuasive for all members to understand and appreciate. These narratives include not only past experiences but also lessons learned from organizationally-sponsored events such as seminars, workshops, and conferences. An informant recognized the need to develop communication skills through knowledge sharing:

Knowledge sharing has increased my understanding by considering how my message might be received by the other person. In addition, it helped me to communicate clearly to avoid misunderstandings and potential conflict with others. (R21)

Team facilitators developed more extensive communication abilities to aid them in their new leadership role. Personal visits to fellow participants, phone calls, and pre- and post-meeting emails built their capacity to engage others in collaboration.

Critical thinking skills were also developed when participants learned to engage in critical reflection and exchange insights that helped one another connect their past experience to the current context in responding to change. Moreover, many of the respondents indicated that team-based knowledge sharing had fostered their leadership potential when they learned to challenge assumptions through questioning and provide timely feedback to help one another make sense of the wider context of change. According to one team facilitator:

Knowledge sharing is an essential part of developing informed and connected leaders, and this initiative is an equal-voice forum within which anyone can respectfully challenge assumptions, question ideas, and contribute critical feedback to colleagues in an open, professional atmosphere. Change is inevitable, and a must — and it is all-inclusive opportunities like these knowledge sharing sessions that ensure that it is as positive and effective as possible. (R5)

More importantly, participants learned to develop a personal “voice” by projecting distinct perspectives about their professional practice, increasing their self-confidence. Additionally, some respondents reflected that they were exposed to greater change management skills as knowledge sharing offered them a psychologically-safe space to build trust and understanding through the testing of ideas leading to knowledge experimentation. They subsequently forged networks of learning and practice that enabled them to facilitate change more effectively. Finally, individuals indicated that they developed knowledge management skills when they learned to make sense of individual knowledge and experiences, and codify tacit knowledge as lessons learned; for example:

The scribe helps to organize and centralize the collective knowledge of the group — its shared information and resources — for the organization to refer to later. (R7)
Participants learned to distil the essence of individual best practices and coproduce knowledge that mattered to the team for subsequent experimentation. Finally, being part of a knowledge sharing team increased individuals’ networking skills as active participation helped develop cross-boundary learning beyond one’s organizational unit or department. One facilitator stressed the impact of multicultural collaboration in networking with his knowledge sharing teammates:

The diversity of these people from all aspects, allowed me to accommodate a myriad of ideas and cultures while working with them. (R12)

Some members even extended the learning to their families and the wider community beyond the organization.

**Managing expectations**

At the individual level, team-based knowledge sharing helped members articulate and identify complex issues that confronted their work practices. Communication was found to be one of the critical challenges that prevented mutual understanding between employees in the organization. Experiences communicated through knowledge sharing not only helped individuals to question assumptions but also provide and receive feedback in order to avoid potential work conflict at the group level. The dynamics of questioning and feedback further helped them manage their expectations and focus on shared objectives that further built greater synergy through cross-functional collaboration, as exemplified in the following extract:

Our last [knowledge sharing] meeting focused specifically on dealing with supervisor disagreements; and during a recent misunderstanding between me and my Unit Head, I was able to leverage some of the techniques that were discussed during the recent meeting such as trying to see things from my Unit Head’s point of view while at same time maintaining a high level of professionalism. (R20)

**Harmonizing silos**

Team-based knowledge sharing promoted openness which raised the consciousness of individuals about the internal and external environment, helping them make better sense of their work context. They derived psychological safety by identifying common work-driven sentiments and relating individual narratives about particular work challenges. At the group and organizational level, knowledge sharing provided a conversational space for individuals of different functions to share specific experiences based on familiar or shared challenges. For instance, cross-divisional knowledge sharing teams served to bridge knowledge gaps between organizational units by capitalizing on shared resources to increase work efficiency:

The [knowledge sharing] session on dealing with stress helped me to realize that my own position has relatively little stress compared to the other attendees and that I shouldn’t complain [about my situation]. That’s more of an indirect benefit [of participation], but it was significant. (R4)

**Facilitating cultural change**

As knowledge sharing was more deeply embedded in the organization, the urgency for change in some specific work areas began to surface. At the individual level, sensemaking of contexts and experiences facilitated critical self-reflection. As teams formulated strategies for change through specific workplace applications, they sought collaboration by garnering support from both colleagues and management. As an example, a team in Saudi Aramco developed communication
ground rules as a workplace application to improve interactional dynamics in their department due to a recent restructuring. Collaboration between the team and key stakeholders of the department helped them implement the application successfully. The shift from self to others created the condition for cognitive transition from individual to group reflection as team members discussed critical issues that ultimately affected the overall culture. Collectively, team-based knowledge sharing helped develop a culture of learning and innovation in Saudi Aramco, as exemplified in the following extract:

Very excited to continue attending those [knowledge sharing] sessions, and most importantly to see some changes in reality. I learned how important [it is] to share knowledge and talk to my colleagues to exchange opinions. (R17)

**Transforming knowledge boundaries**

Team-based knowledge sharing also helped bridge cross-generational knowledge gaps, particularly with the demographic shifts the organization is facing. In 2020, the organization’s workforce will see an increase in Generation Y employees assuming key leadership positions. This potentially poses a challenge for the organization given the possibility of losing its intellectual capital through outgoing or retiring employees if an appropriate knowledge transfer strategy is not in place. Team-based knowledge sharing has therefore served as an HRD intervention to capture tacit knowledge of individuals and store it in codified form including specific lessons learned from best practices. Such lessons and practices could in turn be institutionalized at the wider level increasing organizational learning capacity, as suggested by the following respondent:

[Team-based] knowledge sharing made a great impact on me as a younger employee within the company. Working in a newly established department brings many worries/concerns to the younger generation and how to learn effectively. Having a knowledge sharing team and discussing business and communication related topics have added great value [to me]. Ideas shared could be used to help newly-joined employees or young professionals. (R10)

**Developing reflective practice**

At the operational level, the framework promoted reflective practice by raising the consciousness of individuals based on ongoing experience. Simply put, reflective practice promotes learning-in-practice which suggests learning by doing and vice versa. The more frequent individuals learn to reflect on their actions, particularly how their actions can potentially make a difference to their work and social relations, the greater their learning in practice. Lessons learned from ongoing practices in turn create new actions that can enable or constrain structures of both task and social relations, as exemplified in the two extracts which follow:

This kind of [team-based] knowledge sharing is a two-way communication in which everyone is learning from others. The learning outcomes are maximized because we are learning from colleagues who are sharing with me the same work environment, business practices and management mentalities. (R3)

I have been sharing knowledge with fresh engineers in the unit and this received overwhelming acceptance. These engineers could be seen discussing issues among themselves and do take necessary support from us as required. This change was experienced by me in our unit among other engineers. (R19)
At the strategic level, team-based knowledge sharing is positioned to develop critical change behaviours through the ATP aimed at identifying and institutionalizing best practices, as illustrated in Table 4. The company’s four critical behaviours programme provides the means to achieve this. Already, team-based knowledge sharing has seen a macro-level influence on the organization’s transformation strategy as found in an increase in collaborative initiatives between departments and a higher level of commitment of employees seeking change.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Critical Behaviour</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Knowledge Sharing (Based on Practice)</th>
<th>Outcomes (Based on Data)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Empowerment</td>
<td>Give people responsibility to achieve results and help them overcome major issues.</td>
<td>Every member, regardless of rank, is empowered to help determine a specific challenge statement directly related to pressing work issues and share knowledge that can make a real change in the workplace.</td>
<td>Knowledge sharing has increased a sense of responsibility at the individual and group level to take potential action for the improvement of work life, and provided an arena for employees and managers to share as equals.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conversations</td>
<td>Communicate expectations and discuss performance and career path participants on a regular basis.</td>
<td>The learning structure promotes questioning, dialogue, and feedback to draw out deeply-held assumptions about issues concerning daily work, Saudi Aramco’s 2020 vision, and career prospects.</td>
<td>Personal voice is a powerful tool and has increased individuals’ self-confidence and professional identity, widening their network to accomplish daily tasks.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decision Making</td>
<td>Be disciplined and explicit in your strategic and commercial thinking for important business decisions.</td>
<td>Team learning helps members see the bigger picture of their work enabled through critical reflection of individual experiences, which in turn increases their capacity to make appropriate decisions surrounding their work.</td>
<td>Seeing the bigger picture has increased the learning orientation of individuals to engage in deeper dialogue with management, leading to bottom-up and lateral decision making.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collaboration</td>
<td>Commit to and work towards shared goals with colleagues across the organization.</td>
<td>Team-based knowledge sharing offers a platform to bring disparate teams together for sharing work-induced knowledge, removing functional silos and promoting collaborative learning and action.</td>
<td>Sharing of common issues has increased individuals’ awareness of task interdependence, leading to a shared understanding of professional roles and organizational objectives.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4: Influence of team-based knowledge sharing on critical change behaviours

**Implications for HRD Practice and Research**

This study offers several implications for HRD practice and research. The study extends current conceptualization of team learning based on the perspective of knowledge utilization. It suggests that team-based knowledge sharing promotes an interplay of learning, experience, and action that ultimately transforms practice and sustains effective practice (c.f. Antonacopoulou, 2006;
Yeo and Marquardt, 2015). The framework introduced in Saudi Aramco provides a more focused and holistic learning experience for individuals rather than operating through loosely-coupled or less controlled networks of learning seen in informal knowledge sharing (Marsick and Watkins, 1990). The following are important implications for HRD according to the three main phases of team-based knowledge (Fig. 1): input, process, and output; each phase aiming to promote specific learning processes occurring in team settings.

**Input: Connecting**

Interpretation of work-related challenges develops reflexive learning as individuals socially construct meanings around a working theory that contributes to work practice (Cotter and Cullen, 2012). To be reflexive is to engage in a much deeper level of reflection (Cunliffe, 2004). Collective interpretation of shared workplace issues induces critical reflection through a deeper sensemaking of prior, lived, and projective realities (Weick, Sutcliffe, and Obstfeld, 2005), connecting learning and practice in mutually-constitutive ways (Schön, 1983). Such interpretative process allows individuals to cognitively experience different contexts as they exchange accounts of the symbolic, social, and material aspects of their specific work practices (Niewolny and Wilson, 2009). Interpretive accounts further help them develop frames of references that connect their roles and actions to the wider context of work, offering a different dimension of individual learning (Watkins, 2000).

**Process: Internalizing**

The sharing of concrete experiences takes the social construction of learning further as individuals negotiate deeper meanings by demonstrating their intuitive responses to specific narratives (Plaskoff, 2011; Torraco, 1999). The articulation of embedded and situated practice helps bring tacit knowledge to the forefront as individuals relate particular actions to specific experiences through a language that resonates with others (Brown, Collins, and Duguid, 1989). Situated practice is a process of learning where an appropriate action is enacted at a particular point in time, similar to an act-in-moment (Brown and Duguid, 1991). A heightened awareness of learning often occurs in moments like these, which will lead to learning-in-practice. This is when learning occurs in action and action in learning (Antonacopoulou, 2006); a more constitutive form of learning by doing. Knowledge generated from situated practice is often a by-product of *internalizing* — that is, learning of routines and practices including the influence of emotions, power, and politics on social relations (Lave, 1998; Vince, 1996).

As individuals engage in learning-in-practice, they integrate formal (commonly-accepted) and intuitive (localized) knowledge by identifying dominant action patterns as individual “best practices” (Antonacopoulou, 2005). Localized knowledge reflects learning that has been accumulated over a certain period in a particular context unique to the practitioner (Yanow, 2004). Team learning further promotes the collaborative crafting of “best practices”, converting abstract conceptualization into potential value for active experimentation (Gold and Smith, 2003; Kolb, 1984). Through questioning and feedback, double-loop learning is developed to achieve shared understanding. Double-loop learning usually occurs at a deeper level of dialogue where individuals engage in feedback loops to make sense of complex phenomena (Argyris, 1982; Knapp, 2010). As mentioned, double-loop feedback occurs at the intersection between the sharing of stories and consolidation of ideas (see Fig. 1). At this point, feedback plays a critical role in helping individuals translate specific experiences into recognized knowledge (Sole
and Edmondson, 2002). By engaging in feedback, individuals learn to reframe their cognitive schemas by changing the trajectory of learning which in turn increases their reflective inquiry (Goodman and Wood, 2004).

**Output: Externalizing**

A primary outcome of team-based knowledge sharing is the individual and collective experimentation of various “best practices” arising from the narratives shared. This is where individuals take their learning further into action in a cyclical manner constituting practice (Raelin, 2007). Through a continuous cycle of reflection, the structure of actions will take greater shape in practice increasing individuals’ awareness of the learning dynamics. Such awareness helps them determine if the dynamics will enable or constrain subsequent actions (Marquardt, 2004). As individuals engage in learning-in-practice, they externalize their learning by becoming reflective practitioners (Schön, 1983). This is when they transform the state of knowing (awareness of what is going on) to becoming (enactment of awareness in action) (Coghlan, 2003). Of becoming further suggests that individuals learn to modify their actions to make a difference to their social context (Tsoukas and Vladimirou, 2001). The translation of “knowing” to “becoming” occurs at the intersection between “idea experimentation” and “translation into best practices” of the framework (Fig. 1) where individuals gain confidence in the knowledge they share and the outcomes developed through their actions. Ultimately, the structured approach to knowledge sharing helps generate collective interest in validating knowledge that matters to them as a team. Collective actions developed through collaborative experimentation subsequently shape work practices and transform learning at the organizational level (Coghlan and Coughlan, 2015; Fenwick, 2008). Through team-based knowledge sharing, learning therefore becomes an inescapable way of organizational life (Senge, 1990).

In sum, team-based knowledge sharing has led to some direct and indirect influences of organizational learning and change since its inception. With a pressing need for wider knowledge sharing, Saudi Aramco is placing a strategic focus on team-based knowledge sharing by helping employees transform themselves through critical change behaviours shaping organizational culture (see Fig. 2). Such behaviours support the company’s strategic intent, which aims to make the company more agile and better equipped to navigate the challenges of the future economic landscape.

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**Fig. 2: A strategic perspective of team-based knowledge sharing**
Conclusion

In this paper, we have discussed team-based knowledge sharing as not merely an activity but rather an HRD process that unlocks individual tacit knowledge through the sharing of personal narratives that are constructed in response to commonly-shared complex work challenges. Such narratives, albeit unique, facilitate questioning and feedback as individuals seek clarification regarding each other’s frames of references. Articulation of individual “best practices” encourages others to engage in narrative coproduction in order to shape specific lessons learned for subsequent experimentation. Although team-based knowledge sharing is similar to action learning from the conceptual perspective, it operates quite differently than action learning. The study reported upon in this paper suggests that membership stability and continuity contribute towards a greater commitment of individuals to team learning. Further, problem-driven knowledge sharing engages team members in seeking collaborative solutions to improve work situations by increasing their propensity for knowledge experimentation. Workplace applications are a by-product of action modifications as members develop alternative solutions to address specific work-related challenges. Consequently, team learning is facilitated through knowledge sharing and experimentation.

The study is not without its limitations. It is focused on a framework that is applicable in one organization in Saudi Arabia where a wider application would have been useful. Although the framework was first implemented in Singapore (see Yeo, 2006), it could have served as a comparative backdrop to shed some light on the variation of its utilization and implications in a different context. Still, this study has yielded some valuable insights into the importance of knowledge sharing in relation to team learning. The efficacy of the framework not only lies in the structure but also its application in wider contexts influencing the way individuals think, feel, and act.

To advance this study, it would be useful to consider if team composition has specific influences on team learning outcomes. For instance, researchers could explore if homogeneous and heterogeneous teams learn differently in structured knowledge sharing processes (c.f. O’Leary, Mortensen, and Woolley, 2011). Researchers could also examine if problem complexity might offer different cognitive triggers that influence the trajectory of team learning. In particular, team members might recognize the complexity of a problem but might not want to take any ownership of it. As such, the tension between problem complexity and ownership might offer new insights into the way teams learn (c.f. Yeo and Marquardt, 2015). Finally, researchers could explore if the role of facilitator is a critical agent of change in team learning contexts. For instance, facilitator characteristics such as personality, seniority, professional background, communicative aptitude, and experience might affect team learning dynamics differently (c.f. Sarin and McDermott, 2003).

To conclude, this HRD initiative has been a transformative learning experience for many employees, enhancing their professional identity as they critically reflect on their roles, task interdependence, and shared resources (Mezirow, 2009). In turn, knowledge sharing governed by common objectives will inadvertently lead to interventions at the organizational level transforming practice. Moving forward, the organic growth of team-based knowledge sharing in Saudi Aramco will not only create dramatic shifts in its intellectual landscape but also enable change behaviours that fuel the engine of its accelerated transformation programme towards realizing its 2020 vision.
References


**The Authors**

Roland K. Yeo is Management Learning Researcher at Saudi Aramco. He is also an Adjunct Senior Research Fellow with the University of South Australia Business School and teaches on the EMBA (AACSB) programme at the King Fahd University of Petroleum & Minerals in Saudi Arabia as an Adjunct Associate Professor of Management. He holds a Ph.D. in Organization Studies from the Leeds Business School in UK. He is currently conducting practice-based research in areas relating to team learning, knowledge utilization, and sensemaking.

John R. Stubbs is Knowledge Officer at Saudi Aramco, where he serves as a consultant to departments across the company regarding the implementation of team-based knowledge sharing. He holds an MBA from Hong Kong University of Science and Technology and an MA from Columbia University. His interests include the success factors of diverse workplace cultures and the impact of facilitation in knowledge sharing.

Martin J. Barrett is a Management and Professional Trainer in Saudi Aramco’s Training and Development Organization. He is Supervisor of the Professional Learning and Development Unit responsible for overseeing the delivery of the corporate on-boarding program known as the Saudi Aramco Professional Development Academy. Martin holds a Master’s in Business Administration from the University of Hull and has a keen interest in the development of young professionals, organization development, and knowledge sharing.

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Development Assessment Centres: Practice Implications Arising from Exploring the Participant Voice

Adam Turner, Health Education England (National Health Service, UK)
Lynn Nichol, University of Worcester, UK

This qualitative phenomenological study explores the short-to-medium term personal impact of Development Assessment Centres on UK healthcare managers. The study identified overarching themes relating to personal performance impact, enabling and disabling factors in Centre design, trauma and safety implications, and behavioural adaptation. Practice implications arising focused upon three key areas. Firstly, Centre design should equally enable both introverts and extraverts and provide conscious consideration toward behavioural adaptation amongst participants. Secondly, there is a need for adequate follow-up support to enable participants to continue to learn from their experience, whilst also mitigating any potential risk toward long-term trauma caused by such deeply personal experiences. Finally, where assessment and reward form an output from any Centre, judgement should be limited until a thorough de-brief has been undertaken with the participant to explore causal behavioural responses, as opposed to basing decisions on observed behaviour alone.

Introduction

Empirical studies relating to the impact and validity of Development Assessment Centres (Centres) have been undertaken since the 1970s. However, these appear to have taken a predominantly positivist and quantitative perspective. Although valuable in providing generalisability surrounding the practice-based application of Centres, there appears a lack of understanding toward the personal and lived experiences of participants involved in such activities and any practice-based implications that this may reveal.

A methodological approach employing Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was used to enable the exploration of the personal impact of Development Assessment Centres upon a small sample of UK healthcare managers. IPA was specifically chosen to allow us to connect to the lived experiences of this sample group through its person-centric approach. The study seeks to compare and augment our existing knowledge and to explore the potential of gleaning an added layer of insight that this purely qualitative approach brings to the field. Most importantly, it considers how practitioners using such Centres could apply its findings within both development and assessment contexts.

Development and Assessment Centres

Assessment Centres have been utilized to test for specific role and promotion suitability since the late 1970s, with the majority of research having been undertaken since the 1990s. In recent years, Development Centres have become more commonplace in personal and career development (Goodge, 1994; Hart, 1979; Hinrichs, 1978; Thornton and Krause, 2009; Tillema, 1998; Vloeberghs and Bergham, 2003; Wilson, 1996).
Although both approaches follow similar procedures and forms of assessment (e.g. psychometric tools, observed scenarios, in-tray exercises, multi-source feedback) there is general agreement that their underpinning purpose is different. Assessment Centres deductively assess for a specific suitability through a pass or fail approach, often testing for promotion suitability. Development Centres inductively generate self-insight to explore current performance, future potential and development gaps within a more nurturing environment. In all cases, there is a general consensus that the assessment and feedback aspects of Centres have a positive impact upon participants, which in turn increases both current performance and future potential (Arnold, 2002; Brits et al., 2013; Goodge, 1994 & 1995; Halman and Fletcher, 2000; Iles, 1992; Jansen and Stoop, 2001; Ritchie, 1994; Vlooberghs, 2003; Wilson, 1996).

More recent thinking identifies the interconnected nature between assessment and development within these Centres. Goodge (1994, 1995) cited as authority in several papers (e.g. Arnold, 2002; Hetty-van-Emmerik, 2008; Vlooberghs and Bergham, 2003) proposed First, Second and Third Generational approaches to Centres, identifying a continuum of assessment-development. First-Generation is designed for assessment and selection only, Second-Generation for limited personal development and Third-Generation for pure development with subsequent developmental support.

In acknowledgement of the overlap between development and assessment, the term 'Development Assessment Centre' has become more widely used, acknowledging that this hybrid-fusion is superior, flexible and more cost effective in practice. For example, Centres are commonly used to simultaneously develop the organisational workforce whilst also identifying high potential candidates as part of a talent pool for targeted investment, development, or promotion (Brits et al, 2013; Hetty-van-Emmerik and Bakker, 2008; Jorgensen and Els, 2013).

Whilst examining empirical literature surrounding Centres, it was observed that there appears a lack of high-quality empirical research into the field that focuses upon the participants’ personal perspectives of their experience, something that has also been cited by several authors (e.g. Arnold, 2002; Vlooberghs and Bergham, 2003). In terms of mixed methods perspectives, Arnold’s work (2002) endorses the performance enhancement aspects of Centres and Francis-Smythe and Smith (1997) discuss the psychological impact of Centres upon participants. However, the opportunity to help shape and finesse practice by exploring the lived experiences of participants does not appear to be a predominant theme within wider empirical studies. Practitioners are currently missing important perspectives surrounding Centre design and application that could be gleaned from such a participant-centric enquiry.

**Research Question, Methodology and Sampling**

Seeking to explore the participants’ lived experience of the Centre, this study sought to answer:

What are the personal perceptions of UK healthcare managers on the short-to-medium term impact arising from participation within Development Assessment Centres?

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was chosen as a technique that is increasingly used within healthcare to explore the in-depth experiences of a homogenous sample group within a practice setting. IPA deliberately uses a small number of participants with similar characteristics to make accessible previously unexplored rich understandings of their individual experiences and actively enables and encourages the insider practitioner-researcher to immerse themselves into the practice setting. This approach allows us to gain a deeper interpretation/understanding
surrounding the multiple individual perceptions of the sample group, acknowledging and emphasising the importance of the researcher as part of the interpretation, rather than as an objective bystander, whilst analysing the multiplicity of each individual’s voice. Participant narratives are recorded, documented and thematically analysed to identify both common and unique insights (Costley et al., 2013; Smith et al., 2009).

Exploratory interviews took place with eight middle-management healthcare practitioners who had accessed the same style of Development Assessment Centre within the past year. This particular Centre was designed to bring together participants from multiple and diverse healthcare organisations and test their readiness to participate in a long-term and competitive leadership talent development programme through observed reactions to different leadership-focused exercises and assessments against a healthcare leadership competency model. In all cases and regardless of pass or fail, participants were provided with feedback reports, coaching and signposted to wider personal development offers relevant to their assessment outcomes.

Participant narratives were separated into a pass and fail sub-group (Table 1) and thematically analysed to explore each participant’s unique personal perspectives arising from their experience.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant Sample Description</th>
<th>Total Number of Participants</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Development Assessment Centre — Pass (P): Participants were successfully seen as ready to progress onto a resultant leadership development programme. They gained a findings report and participated in coaching feedback.</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Development Assessment Centre — Fail (F): Participants were unsuccessful in progressing onto a leadership programme. However, they did receive a findings report, access to coaching feedback and signposting to alternative development.</td>
<td>3</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: Sample Group Overview

Analysis and Interpretation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Meta Theme</th>
<th>Theme</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A. Personal performance impact</td>
<td>Self-awareness increases</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Changing, enabling and taking action</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B. Enabling and disabling factors</td>
<td>Enabling a feedback environment</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Need for on-going support</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Being ready for the experience</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Diversity of fellow participants</td>
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<tr>
<td>C. Trauma and safety</td>
<td>Anxiety</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Trauma and safety</td>
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<tr>
<td>D. Behaviour adaptation</td>
<td>Acting and not being normal self</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Inhibiting for reflectors/introverts</td>
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Table 2: Summary of high level themes arising from analysis of interviews, presented in order of frequency observed within existing literature as reviewed during this research study
This section reflexively synthesizes and interprets themes arising from participant narratives. Table 2 has been constructed to introduce the thematically summarized findings arising from the analysis of participant interviews during this empirical study. The ordering (A–D) relates to themes being more to less/not present within the existing empirical literature relating to Centres that was observed as part of the study.

The following section summarizes a detailed discussion surrounding the analysis and where appropriate, utilizes direct testimony from participant narratives to illustrate key points. We differentiate between those who passed (P) and those who failed (F) the Centres in these illustrations.

**A. Personal Performance Impact**

**Self-awareness increases**

Often expressed as ‘emotional intelligence’, Centres appeared to elicit strong feelings of becoming progressively self-aware, increased consideration towards personal impact upon others, and a higher level of confidence to ‘be yourself’. Narratives identified how participants actively questioned these insights and how they could optimally apply them to increase their future performance. They linked this shift in self-awareness to the Centres’ ability to offer constructive and real-time feedback through peer and facilitator observation. The combination of honest-feedback, space/time to think, and pure focus upon themselves rapidly allowed participants to take this self-insight to a deeper level.

Describing their stories appeared to induce a mixture of enlightenment and release, often evoking feelings of excitement and energy toward the emergent possibilities that the experience had given them. The experience appeared to help participants identify their personal voice, and at times gave them permission to be themselves, possibly due to the inductive and exploratory nature of the Centres. These findings support our existing knowledge that identifies the generic performance improvement aspects of Centres.

**Enabling, changing and taking action**

Self-insight appeared to transfer into enablement, generating a sense of achievement, which in turn positivity motivated and energized participants into taking action. This appears to expand upon Halman and Fletcher’s (2000) findings whereby Centres elicit increased self-esteem.

Positive career impact was also a strong theme, building upon existing quantitative-empirical studies with similar findings (Hinrichs, 1978; Ritchie, 1994). Many participants gained new roles and the remainder were able to demonstrate increased responsibilities, including those who failed the Centre. Participants associated career progression to the insight, confidence and motivation generated by the Centres, demonstrated within the following narrative:

> I then applied for a higher banded role. I’m now managing a national process, which I think before the assessment … I wouldn't have felt confident enough to do (F).

In addition to career progression, narratives also demonstrated how participants were able to describe significant impact on their current job performance, which was often validated through feedback from others as demonstrated here:
I’ve changed the way we go about discussing and creating ideas, it’s more team led ... so we get a lot more ideas and innovation ... My manager has in fact noticed that it has improved me ... I can see myself I’ve changed (P).

These findings provide deeper knowledge towards supporting existing literature and also support the practical application of centres for both personal development within current role, and future career potential (Arnold, 2002; Brits, et al., 2013; Goodge, 1994 & 1995; Iles, 1992; Jansen and Stoop, 2001; Jorgensen and Els, 2013; Vloeberghs and Bergham, 2003; Wilson, 1996).

Narrative surrounding an increased accuracy when identifying future development needs was also identified. This potentially appeared to relate to the impartiality of the evidence-base generated by the Centre, outside of any bias from a normal appraisal review. For this reason, participants from both the Pass and Fail groups identified how the experience acted as a development intervention in its own right:

Going through the Centre first, it pinpoints where your weaknesses are, so you can actually go on the course ‘knowing’ it’s going to help you, rather than only ‘thinking’ it’s going to help (P).

I actually think the Centre would be as good as attending a development programme to get people aware of what they need to develop in their future (F).

The rapidness of self-insight gained, increased motivation, and evidence-based accuracy of career next-steps is supportive of existing literature relating the use of Centres and creating Return-on-Investment (Thornton and Potemra, 2010). It therefore appears to endorse the practice-based use of Centres as cost-efficient, rapid development and performance enhancement interventions in their own right.

However, it was observed that the interchangeable assessment-development focus of the Centres appeared to subtly vary the participants’ emotional responses toward their experience and resultant motivation to take further action. The assessment layer of the Centres appeared to evoke feelings of ‘I had done my best’, being ‘good enough’ and an emotional ‘sigh of relief’ that it was over. For some participants, this focus on purely passing the assessment aspects of the Centre appeared to take priority over any focus upon exploring/embracing the personal developmental aspects that the Centres were also designed to elicit. This provokes consideration toward the need for practitioners to ensure that follow-up support is provided to explore the developmental outputs from the Centres to maximize Return-on-Investment from the experience, as we will explore in more detail in sections B and C.

**B. Enabling and Disabling Factors**

**Enabling a feedback environment**

Multiple-sources of clear impartial feedback, as identified as enabling by Goodge (1995) combined with good facilitation and the safe environment generated from a ground-rules / group-contracting phase enabled participants to become open to exploring diverse feedback during the experience:

[It] helped me understand what other people were thinking … even if there’s something there that you think isn’t true or fair, the fact remains that it’s somebody’s interpretation of you … take that on board … that’s obviously the impression that I gave to the person on the day, and need to think about how I come across to others (P).
The importance of good quality, encouraging, ‘warm and friendly’ facilitation was also highlighted as a key aspect toward creating this enabling environment.

**Need for on-going support**

Potentially relating to the rapidness of the experience, the need for on-going support to continue the journey of self-discovery resulting from the insights gained during the Centres appeared fundamental in the design of the Centres by all participants. This was encapsulated by one participant who articulated:

> One day may not be quite enough ... it has such an impact on you, you need a way to digest it afterwards (P).

This supports the stance of existing literature and best-practice guidelines suggesting that Centres should not be a standalone event (British Psychological Society, 2003 & 2015; Goedge, 1995; Vloeberghs and Bergham, 2003). Although all Centres within this study offered feedback-coaching, participants who found ongoing methods to explore the learning arising from the experience in deeper levels of detail (e.g. coaching, manager-support, reflective exercises, wider development programmes) appeared to be the most successful in demonstrating subsequent personal impact. Congruent with many sectors, the majority of participants expressed healthcare as a high-pressured environment, identifying a risk that their self-insights gained could be ‘placed on the shelf’ without a form of on-going support, therefore reducing Return-on-Investment of the developmental activity.

Essentially the Centre signposted and opened doors, however responsibility was on the participant whether they chose to walk through such a door longer-term. Participants who did not embrace the support available to make-sense of the often-overwhelming amount of self-insight gained, appeared least able to identify personal-impact. This appeared a lonely place for these individuals who needed further support, but for varied reasons appeared to have been apprehensive to seek it. As we will explore later, several participants appeared to close the door completely due to the intensity of their experience. It became clear that where participants had not found effective ways to make-sense of their experience, the research interview evoked a form of coaching conversation. Reflexively, this was an unexpected role that the interviewer realized they had taken on. One participant made direct reference to the interview being a sense of release, whilst another suggested ‘keep asking questions, like you are now’ as a means to help them gain post-Centre insight. This supports the significant need for practice to ensure participants are able to continue to make-sense of their experiences after the event.

Subsequently, the interviewer recommended coaching to several participants following the interview. It is interesting to reflect how participants appeared more engaged to participate in coaching after the interview, even though coaching formed the basis of the Centre and was offered to all as an ongoing development offer after the experience. This could be explained by the impartiality of the interviewer, allowing the participants to more easily open-up and see the benefit from exploring their experience further.

**Being ready for the experience**

Building upon the theme of needing post-Centre support, the concept of ‘being ready’ for the experience appeared critical as illustrated by one participant stating “it needs to be self-directed ... something you’ve got drive to do”. However, from a practitioner perspective, assessing for
prior readiness appeared paradoxical, as the intended outcome of the Centre is a readiness assessment itself.

Ultimately, being ready appeared to be seen as exhibiting an open-mind and a strong desire/ambition for on-going self-discovery, as well as a drive for the reward of getting a place on the subsequent development programme. Testing out for these drivers when selecting participants to engage in similar Centres may be beneficial within the practice-based setting.

**Diversity of fellow participants**

The multi-professional environment of the Centres, bringing together participants from varied roles across healthcare appeared to empower participants to learn from each other’s diverse professional perspectives. This diversity of exposure appeared unlikely to naturally occur within their day-to-day professional roles:

… engaging with people from other agencies … get some common ground and build on it … Before I attended if there was people I didn’t know, I’d stay on the peripheral really … it gave you those interpersonal skills from interaction with other agencies (P).

Whilst exploring personal values elicited by the in-depth nature of the Centres, participants also appeared to establish an understanding that diversity transcends labels and began to see the positives in difference and learning from each other:

It was interesting to have a complete mix of people from different stages in their careers and different roles … recognising everyone’s priorities and strengths, to enable us, in recognition of our differences and using it as a positive (P).

This could suggest that Centres may actively support the practice of organisational diversity (i.e. we are all different) and inclusion (i.e. celebrating and valuing individuals’ difference to help people reach their potential) agendas, which are areas of business responsibility that appear increasingly linked to HR practice functions.

Building upon this observation, participants appeared to positively learn from each other by observing the diversity of their peers’ behaviours, identifying the enabling and disabling features congruent with their own personal values and beliefs. For some, this learning provoked a choice towards an increased or decreased demonstration of this behaviour in their own future-self. Whilst in these instances, the behavioural focus generated positive self-insight, section D will explore the more complex issues observed surrounding participant behaviour.

**C. Anxiety, Trauma and Safety**

Contrasting with the generic enabling themes identified above, a polarising theme arose whereby the assessment-focused environment had the potential to cause levels of trauma. Although all participants identified levels of ‘anxiety’, ‘nerves’ and ‘exhaustion’, more traumatic side-effects were identified by participants, provoking survival and fight-or-flight responses. This was seen in the majority of participant narratives, both those who passed and failed the Centres. However, it appeared particularly heightened for those who failed and/or had unmet self-reflection needs. The following participant, who did pass, identified how certain exercises elicited a direct form of personal trauma:
[It was] … one of the most intense days of my life. It sounds like a really dramatic thing to say (laughs) but it really was ... When we did that exercise, I absolutely hated that. Every fibre of me wanted to run away ... I made up my mind if I was asked to do anything like that again, I’d say no (P).

In this case, the participant went on to describe how they were able to translate this experience into a positive outcome. In other cases, the experience appeared to shut-down participants who subsequently sought no further support to make sense of their experience, resulting in levels of what appeared to be longer-term trauma.

Although feedback reports, coaching and wider development offers were provided to all participants, this further heightens the need for targeted post-Centre engagement and support, highlighted by the following participant narrative:

If their confidence is lacking and they had a bad experience, you don’t want it to take you down even lower ... obviously you need to have the support mechanisms in place afterwards if needed (P).

Exploring the narratives of individuals that felt disabled by the Centre, it potentially appeared that the Centres were also evoking levels of unresolved past-life trauma, further inhibiting their performance. One participant who subsequently failed the Centre described feeling shut-down and unable to positively participate from perceived criticism. Another described how an initially positive experience turned intensely traumatic as a result of an exercise that appeared to bring back memories of historic trauma. This resulted in a loss of self-control, impeded performance, and was directly attributed to personal failure in the Centre environment:

I’m quite an intrinsically motivated person. As soon as something knocks me off my kilter I find it hard to get back … the exercise made me feel out of control … I actually work in a very deprived area where trauma is part of people’s everyday lives … looking after families or mothers or whatever, who have had these traumatic experiences … I don’t know how to explain it really. I don’t think they realized that what [the exercise] means to you (F).

Although levels of mild trauma could be seen in all participant narratives, this deeper level of performance inhibiting trauma only appeared in participants who failed the Centre. For these individuals and potentially resulting from the sense of being unable to deal with this trauma in the moment, feelings appeared to manifest themselves in denial and an inability to express any positive impact from the Centre experience. However, exploration during both interviews did elicit evidence of positive performance improvements, but to a lesser degree than those who had passed. These participants appeared to shutout the experience as the only means to deal with it.

These findings potentially build-upon insights within the studies by Hetty-van-Emmerik and Bakker (2008) and Francis-Smythe, J., and Smith (1997) identifying how negative or poor quality feedback from Centres, coupled with work pressures has a direct impact upon the participants’ psychological state and is likely to lead to negative future performance implications.

Building upon findings within section A, one participant who failed the Centre named the research interview experience as ‘cathartic’. This sense of release possibly demonstrated how, although a year had passed, the exploratory questioning during the interview had allowed adequate reflexively into exploring deeper self-insights, thus becoming more open to learning from the experience. As mentioned previously, when coaching was offered after the interview, participants were open to this, potentially as a result of the impartial and exploratory questioning during the interview. Again, on-going post-Centre support appears ethically critical within the practice of running these Centres.
D. Behavioural Adaptation

*Acting, not being normal self*

Several participants innocently described experimenting with new behaviours during Centres, as demonstrated here:

> I thought of it as a different side of me really … I was enjoying a new confidence to speak out and direct things … I think the Centre brought me out of myself really (P).

Two possible scenarios appeared to arise here. Firstly, Centres may have given participants permission to identify and test out new behaviours that better resonated with their unique values, the confidence to keep them, and thus demonstrate a truer version of themselves. Alternatively, Centres may have directed participants towards acting out certain behaviours during the Centre, eliciting a learnt behaviour rather than being a true reflection of who they really are. Reflexively, both scenarios appeared to be taking place.

Building upon these observations further, a concerning theme of being unable to be your normal-self and more disturbingly learning how to behave to pass arose, potentially as a result of being driven towards the reward for passing the Centre. This was demonstrated within the following participant narrative, who did indeed pass:

> It took me a little part of the morning to actually twig, how to behave … the first bit was actually trying to understand it (P).

If accurate on a wider scale, these findings may have significant validity implications for assessment-focused Centres. It would appear to contradict the rationale for the Centres pass-or-fail assessment environment, which has the intention of eliciting behaviours to predict future performance and therefore potential. These findings appear amplified when coupled with the following theme that identified how the Centres appeared inhibiting toward more reflective and introverted participants.

*Inhibiting for reflectors/introverts*

For participants with clearer self-identified introverted and reflective personality preferences, the intense assessment focused environment with little time for self-reflection appeared to make them feel forced to adapt and behave extraverted to be seen, observed and assessed. For these participants, the Centre proved overwhelming and subsequently appeared to disadvantage this audience. This generated a sense of frustration and being torn-apart. More notably, all three participants that failed the Centre identified themselves as introverts/reflectors:

> I already knew I’m a reflector ... I found it quite intimidating because I like to reflect on things before I put my opinion, and I felt that wasn’t taken into account more, so I felt on the back-foot with some groups I was in because there were such big personalities … I was trying to adapt my learning style to fit in with everyone else’s, rather than mine being incorporated into the day (F).

Although the above narrative identifies pre-awareness of their reflective preferences and feelings of being disadvantaged due to this, they later went on to describe significant post-Centre achievement. They sought out alternative self-directed learning opportunities and development programmes, obtained a senior national promotion, and directly linked this back to the personal insights that the Centre gave them.
This begins to question how, despite failing the Centre, did the individual achieve this as a result of the Centre experience? Or alternatively, did the Centre environment disadvantage them because of their reflective preferences, and in fact should have identified that they were ready to progress? However, this individual worked within an educational environment and therefore may have had increased access to developmental support to enable wider reflection and positive actions after the experience.

It should be noted here that whilst the two other participants who failed the Centre were able to identify increased role responsibility, neither directly related this to the outcomes from the Centre. It should also be noted that this observation of being forced to become seen was also identified within participants who passed the Centre: “... they were just saying things to be heard, because it was a bit of an artificial situation” (P).

Some participants who appeared to exhibit introverted/reflective preferences and the subsequent inability to consciously adapt their behaviours went on to describe seeing peers compromise their values to adapt their behaviours for the reward of passing. This feeling appeared strongest in those who failed the Centre:

I’m intrinsically motivated, when I looked at other people and even though they were unhappy about the task ... they were going to participate even though they were unhappy about it, the sort of extrinsic thing … the reward for getting it … they will actually jump through hoops … to achieve their goal … compromising your own integrity slightly to do that (F).

The values-based dilemma described by this particular participant was so overwhelming that a sense of disapproval toward their peers appeared to overshadow any possible positive impact for themselves. This may potentially demonstrate a lack of open-mindedness/readiness for the Centre, identified as a critical enabler above in section A. Alternatively, the experience itself may have caused animosity toward their own lack of skill to adapt their behaviours. Perhaps by perceiving others as appearing to compromise their values to pass and seeking to blame them was in fact a mechanism to ease this personal discomfort. Either way, this discredited the Centre in the eyes of that participant causing them to give up on the experience. Reflexively considering the participant interviews, all of these factors may have been at work.

This values-based choice; to compromise beliefs and natural behaviours to ‘be seen’ and risk reduced performance by acting outside of behavioural preferences, or to remain their true-self and risk failing the Centre, appears in direct conflict with the previous enabling theme of gaining your voice. Here, Centres appeared to take the voice away from these participants, ultimately resulting in an intense sense of letting themselves down due to this inability to adapt behaviour as identified by the following participant:

[I felt] a little bit demoralized … like I’d let myself down, when I knew the answers really, I just hadn’t got the assertiveness to say them (F).

Synthesising the above themes, both ethical and validity considerations arise, which appear lacking within Centre best-practice guidelines (British Psychological Society, 2003; International Task-Force, 2009). It appears that the assessment and reward focused aspects of these Centres may have inadvertently assessed some individual’s abilities to identify and adapt to the required behaviours to pass, rather than assessing their natural behaviour. This caused a proportion of participants to act out of character and not allow observation and assessment of their natural behaviour. Coupled with potentially disadvantaging those with introverted and reflective
personality preferences who are less able to rapidly adapt to the Centre, this ultimately calls into question; are we really assessing true performance and potential, or are we simply assessing the ability of participants to identify the required behaviours to pass and to successfully act into these? It also appears that this drive to pass the assessment aspects and resultant reward could be taking precedence over embracing the developmental aspects and self-insight that could be gained through approaching the Centre by behaving as their normal self.

This potentially unforeseen impact generated by the assessment-focused aspects of the Centres warrants further investigation on a wider scale, particularly in relation to using Centres for assessment within role progression, recruitment purposes, or where any form of reward is offered. Furthermore, it draws the validity of such Centres into question with due consideration towards fair Centre design when assessing reflective and introverted participants, especially when based on pure assessor observations alone. It also provokes consideration as to whether we, as practitioners, should combine both assessment and developmental aspects of Centres, if any assessment focus appears to potentially undermine the ability of some participants to embrace developmental aspects.

Discussion

Summarising key findings from participant narratives

The participant focused perspective of this study appeared to be supportive of and augment our existing knowledge observed within existing empirical research, identifying that Centres can enable participants to generate self-insight and enhance personal performance within their current role, whilst also providing support toward identifying and exploring future career potential.

However, the study also generated wider insights surrounding behavioural adaptation, potentially disadvantaging participants with introverted and reflective personality preferences, and most concerning the potential for the experience to induce trauma. This alternative picture directly contrasts with the majority of existing studies that demonstrate Centres ability to positively enhance performance and potential.

A values-based choice appeared to present itself for those participants who felt unable to behave as their normal selves. They could try and adapt their behaviour to be seen/survive the experience, risking performance degradation due to being forced outside of their natural behavioural preferences and comfort zone, or alternatively choose to not be seen at all and risk failing the Centre completely.

Negating the Centres purpose to assess future performance and readiness for career progression, an interrelated theme arose whereby individuals appeared to learn how to behave to pass, rather than behaving as themselves, driven by the rewards that passing the assessment aspects of the Centre would offer. These observations potentially mean that Centres could be assessing the ability of the more astute participant to identify and adapt their behaviours to pass, therefore raising validity challenges in Centre application.

For individuals who could not adapt their behaviour to be seen, coupled with the potential for certain exercises to provoke high levels of trauma, the Centres became overwhelming, and effectively these participants shut-down from the experience both during and after the
Centre. This resulted in them being less likely to embrace post-Centre support, and effectively induced a layer of unresolved trauma. Although a mild level of performance improvement was described, disturbingly this increased level of trauma appeared to be potentially inhibiting future performance for these participants, rather than enabling them to reach their potential.

Considerations toward behavioural adaptation, balancing introverted/extraverted preferences and mitigating trauma do not appear substantially accounted for within existing literature, or best-practice ethical guidelines for facilitating Centres (British Psychological Society, 2003; International Task-Force, 2009). This means that considerations toward these areas may be overlooked within the design, validity and ethical practice within existing Centres.

**Practice implications**

Findings are congruent with wider studies that see the benefits of using the development and assessment nature of the Centres to rapidly identify and signpost individuals toward their future potential. The study also endorses the use of Centres to increase Return-on-Investment in staff development, providing an evidence-based view towards the most appropriate development interventions for participants. This should be equally considered in the context that many participants saw the rapid development provided through the self-insight gained during the Centre as all they needed. Even those who had failed could identify performance improvements and even promotions that they related to the insights gleaned from the experience. An interesting application of Centres being used to support organisational diversity and inclusion agendas also arose.

Using Centres as part of an internal talent strategy may therefore potentially reduce the resource burden associated with placing large proportions of staff on longer-term development programmes. In addition, it may endorse the use of Centres in helping individuals to identify their potential and enhance the accuracy of signposting them to their next developmental steps by removing the bias from career conversations which are most likely to take place within an appraisal setting. This increased accuracy may therefore increase Return-on-Investment for any subsequent organisational investment in these individuals.

There also appears to be a darker side to the use of Centres in practice when combining assessment and development aspects. Whilst this study cannot state generalizability, it may provoke careful choices for practitioners when hybridising development and assessment aspects within Centres. Whilst existing literature identifies that practice often combines development and assessment due to resource and funding limitations (Goode, 1995; Vloeberghs and Bergham, 2003) practitioners may wish to consider how the assessment focus of any such Centres could have profound and negative impacts upon some participants. This appears particularly true for those with introverted and reflective preferences and unresolved past-life trauma, the latter being almost impossible for practitioners to know about.

More worryingly the potential for some participants to actively choose to change their behaviour in order to be seen in a way that enables them to pass appears to invalidate the use of the Centres altogether. These aspects may therefore result in imprecise assessment, identifying less suitable candidates for any subsequent reward, as well as rendering any personal development aspects arising from the Centre as inaccurate or of less value for participants. All of this in turn could reduce the Return-on-Investment for the participants and for the organisation investing in the Centres.
Ensuring quality post-Centre feedback and placing strict emphasis on a wider form of follow-up support such as coaching appear ethically essential within such assessment-focused environments where participants have reduced time to think and reflect. This will ensure that any potential level of anxiety or trauma elicited by Centres can be mitigated and addressed, and also enables maximum Return-on-Investment toward the developmental aspects that Centres provide participants.

Findings would also suggest that where any form of assessment takes place, exercises should be cognisant towards allowing introverts/reflectors to feel able to participate equally and be seen. As part of Centre design and to increase validity of outcomes, practitioners may consider integrating ways to measure and test that participants are indeed behaving as their natural self and congruent with their personal values, or if they are adapting their behaviours driven by a need to pass. Practitioners may wish to consider how exercises can continually mix combinations of competencies to ensure participants are less likely to realize how to behave to pass and act into this. Allowing for exercises that equally advantage introverted/reflective participants, for example, individualized scenarios and one-to-one interpersonal tasks, may also enable these types to feel more able to participate, feel seen and therefore see the experience positively. The use of psychometrics to identify personality preferences in advance of the Centre may also aid facilitators in contextualising their observations of participants during exercises. However, this would increase resource implications whilst running Centres.

It is also recommended that any judgement on pass or fail should be withheld until a thorough de-brief has been undertaken with the participant, rather than making any judgement purely on observed behaviour alone. This de-brief should be designed to explore and understand why the participant approached the Centre the way they did, what was going on for them internally that couldn’t be observed, how this related to their personal values, past experiences and also behavioural preferences. Essentially this form of post-Centre feedback coaching could form the final part of the assessment. This in turn would allow space for the participant to further explore their experience in a developmental context, be supportive toward participants with reflective preferences, reduce any potential trauma elicited, promote the positive developmental aspects of the experience and focus the participant on moving-forwards toward their potential.

Findings from this study may also question the use of pure Assessment Centres in practice. For example, within job applications, promotions and where any form of reward is offered. Practitioners may wish to consider the transferability of the findings from this study in these contexts, and ensure that any assessment environment adequately allows participants of both introverted, extraverted and wider personality preferences the ability to demonstrate their potential fairly and equally, with additional time allocated for a formal de-brief/feedback coaching as part of the assessment. Without consideration towards this, practitioners may be limiting their choice of candidate to those who can ‘shout the loudest’ or those who can simply adapt their behaviours to what is being tested, rather than truly identifying the best candidate for the opportunity.

Research Implications

Understanding that phenomenological studies do not seek to generalize and acknowledging that this is a small-scale study, it is strongly recommended that the tensions identified here are further studied across a wider cross-section of Centres. In particular, contrasts between both assessment and development-focused environments should be considered.
The additional facets of understanding in the context of existing research, together with the new perspectives demonstrated within this study also confirm the added value that a qualitative research paradigm can bring towards exploring the field of Development and Assessment Centres in the future.

**Conclusion**

This study was designed to develop a rich understanding of participants’ individual lived experiences of Development Assessment Centres to provoke questioning of existing practice and discover potentially new avenues of research. Whilst supporting the stance of many existing empirical studies on the positive aspects of Centre application to enhance performance and potential, the exploration of participants’ ‘individual voices’ in this study, has generated a set of findings with important implications for existing practice and new avenues for future enquiry.

Most notable of these findings include the potential for Centres to induce trauma and disadvantage some participants, particularly those with introverted and reflective preferences. Coupled with the possibilities that some participants may be actively adapting their behaviour for the reward of passing, rather than allowing observation of themselves in their natural state also brings validity challenges for future Centre application in practice. Whilst the study cannot claim these findings as generalizable, these themes can now be taken forward in subsequent studies to help develop more nuanced and effective approaches to enhance practice application of Development Assessment Centres.

**References**


**The Authors**

Adam Turner is Leadership and Organisational Development Lead for Health Education England. He has worked in the field of organisational development for the entirety of his career and is passionate about developing people, organizations and systems. He has a keen interest in the field of talent management, having previously led nationally on the NHS Leadership Academy talent management programme of work, developing healthcare talent toolkits and approaches that have been rolled out nationally across the UK NHS. Adam holds a Masters degree and is currently studying towards his PhD at the University of Worcester.

Dr Lynn Nichol is a Principal Lecturer in HR and Head of the Leadership, Management and HR Subject Group at the University of Worcester. She is committed to developing organizational practice, through research and leads the Professional Doctorate and DBA programmes at the University. She works with senior practitioners from a wide range of organizations seeking to influence and change practice through their insider research. Her current work focuses on how managers make use of academic scholarship, work based learning and using mentoring and coaching in doctoral supervision.
The genesis of this journal has a long history both within the University Forum for HRD (UFHRD) and the International Federation of Training and Development Organisations (IFTDO). For UFHRD it can be traced back to the establishment of the journal Human Resource Development International (HRDI). And so a brief summary of the history of that journal is a necessary starting point.

HRDI was conceived by Professor Monica Lee who was a founding member of the UFHRD. Monica’s vision was of a journal which facilitated interaction and cross fertilisation of knowledge, ideas and research between the academic and professional communities in human resource development. Her vision found favour with a publishing company. Since Monica knew that her vision of joining research and practice was shared by the UFHRD her approach to the Forum for sponsorship of the then proposed journal was warmly received and endorsed. The same was true of an approach to the Academy of Human Resource Development (AHRD) and so the proposal was for the journal to be sponsored by AHRD, UFHRD and, through the latter, by Eurosform. HRDI was launched in 1998 with Monica Lee as the founding Editor in Chief. Monica and her editorial team developed a number of then innovative features in the first couple of volumes. These were designed to realize the shared ambition of editors and sponsors of connecting theory and practice; an ambition best expressed in the aims set for the journal;

Human Resource Development International promotes all aspects of practice and research that explore issues of individual, group and organisational learning and performance. In adopting this perspective Human Resource Development International is committed to questioning the divide between practice and theory; between the practitioner and the academic; and between traditional and experimental methodological approaches.

As one example of how this vision was to be achieved, the journal had two ‘Perspectives’ sections to encourage and accommodate non-refereed contributions. The thinking was that academics would generally value and so prefer to submit peer reviewed articles, which are part of the currency of academic careers, while HRD professionals would naturally prefer not to go through the peer review process as speed of publication would be valued more. But, while these might be general truths, the editors of HRDI also wished to encourage joint submissions from academics and professionals as both peer reviewed and non-reviewed contributions. However, and despite the original vision and aims for the journal being pursued by Monica and successor Editors in Chief, HRDI has not been as successful in meeting the vision and aims as originally intended and expected. This was clear to the UFHRD by the eleventh Volume of HRDI in 2008. And so at about that time the Forum decided to investigate the possibility of creating and sponsoring a new journal which could focus more directly on promoting contributions from HRD professionals and provide content more directly focused on professional practice.
From 2008 to 2015 may seem a long time to launch a new journal, and no doubt it is longer than usual. But, as a voluntary network the UFHRD relies on the grace and favour of the staff of its member institutions to get work done. At the onset of initiating a new journal the Forum benefited from the committed efforts of just one such person who progressed the idea to the point of a favourable response from a potential publisher. Unfortunately, and as is often the case, that person’s work circumstances changed with the effect that no further progress was made and the idea lay fallow for a few years. However and fortunately in 2014 Dr Jan Myers, aided by Dr Mark Loon, provided the resource needed to resurrect the idea and between them provided some renewed impetus. By that time though the staff in the publishers who had shown initial interest had also moved on and so Jan and Mark had to start again from scratch. Their initial analysis of the market also showed significant changes in the landscape of publishing, especially academic publishing. Some of these changes; for example on open access; are driven by the UK processes of what is known as dual funding for academic research. One part of the ‘dual funding’ is based on research quality in universities as determined by the Research Excellence Framework (REF). And so launching a new journal with any form of academic foundation or content is a more complicated matter in 2014/2015 than it was in 1998 or would have been even in 2008. Fortunately this is the point when the International Federation of Training and Development Organisations (IFTDO) enter the story.

IFTDO and UFHRD had enjoyed a mutually beneficial though informal relationship for a number of years. This had been facilitated in part through the various roles of Professor Jim McGoldrick who is President of the UFHRD and was for a time a Vice President of the UK Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD). The CIPD is a member of both the UFHRD and IFTDO. Through Jim’s contact with Bob Morton, recently Chair of IFTDO Board (and now IFTDO Treasurer), and also Chair of the CIPD Enterprises Ltd Board, a more formal relationship was established between the two organisations in 2012 through the establishment of a Joint Scientific Committee. Another item of serendipity was the appointment by IFTDO of Dr Rick Holden as Editor of their newsletter. Rick is a long standing stalwart of the UFHRD and an experienced editor of academic journals and his expertise enabled the discussion of a joint journal to progress to a concrete proposal.

From the perspective of IFTDO the idea of an IFTDO Journal arose from a strategic review of IFTDO’s activities in 2009. Bob Morton and his fellow board members, Ray Bonar and Carol Panza had recognized the opportunity for IFTDO to harness its practitioner base and forge a link to academia which would help IFTDO meet its purpose of developing HRD knowledge and practice globally. However after initial exploration of the concept, it was clear that the expertise and resources to develop a stand-alone IFTDO Journal were not available from IFTDO’s largely practitioner base. IFTDO recognized it needed to develop stronger links to academia and a basis on which to generate and contribute content for a journal. A first step towards this was the creation of IFTDO’s Global HRD Awards. The award categories were extended in 2011 to include a Research category and this enabled stronger links to UFHRD who through Jim McGoldrick provided the judging criteria and expertise for the research category. The success of this new category provided a springboard for detailed discussions with the Joint Scientific Committee about a joint UFHD/IFTDO Journal. The proposal and initial funding was approved by the IFTDO Board and Rick Holden has played a major role in moving the joint journal from concept to reality.

And so this journal has finally been born. It has had a long gestation but no doubt has and will continue to benefit from that. All directly involved in realising the joint ambition of UFHRD
and IFTDO are to be thanked and congratulated, but especially Jan Myers, Mark Loon and Rick Holden. As the UFHRD is a body mainly, but not exclusively composed of academic institutions and IFTDO is a body mainly, but not exclusively composed of professional institutions, the shared belief in the value of bridging the so called theory/practice divide will surely be applied in this journal. The two organisations have already demonstrated the possibility and value of working together and we are both confident that this journal will continue to reap and demonstrate that value.

The Authors

Bob Morton has a long association with IFTDO. He is the current Treasurer and has previously been President and Chair. He is Chair of CIPD Enterprises Ltd, a wholly owned subsidiary of the CIPD and represents CIPD as President of EAPM (European Association of People Management). His consultancy, ODHRM Consultants Ltd, involves Bob working with a range of companies, worldwide, including BASF, Petronas, Tata and others. Until recently Bob was Vice Chair of Bristol University’s Governing Council and Chair of its Human Resources and Health & Safety Committee.

Professor Jim Stewart is one of the principal founders of the UFHRD. He is currently acting Chair of the Forum and has been Chair and Executive Secretary. He has held professorships at Nottingham Trent University and Leeds Metropolitan University and is currently Professor of HRD at Coventry University. He is the author of several HRD books including Employee Development Practice (1999, FT Pitman Publishing) and Learning and Talent Development (with Rigg, C., 2011, CIPD).
HRD Viewpoints


Sophie Mills and Amanda Lee

Is it possible to engage in research requiring the participation of HRD practitioners from a multitude of nations, without offering individual tangible incentives? This viewpoint shares the experiences of our HRD research team in attempting to gather research data from HRD practitioners across the Globe. Issues that potentially indicate tensions between the worlds of HRD practice and academia are reflected upon in the following account. We suggest HRD practitioner awareness of, and connection with, the associated research has a fundamental influence on the relative successes of data collection methods. A review of our experiences of conducting this data collection follows.

Our research was jointly funded by IFTDO (The International Federation for Training and Development Organisations) and UFHRD (The University Forum for HRD). We were tasked with conducting a comparative analysis of Human Resource Development (HRD) practices across Africa, Asia and Europe. The guiding research questions addressed in the study involve the scrutiny of the roles, strategies, contribution and driving forces of HRD in each of these three regions.

In order to collect relevant data for this research our methods included accessing the following four main sources:

- Review of relevant literature — incorporating academic and ‘grey’ sources.
- Delphi style panel — set up to determine which countries in Africa, Asia and Europe should be visited to conduct focus groups.
- On-line questionnaire — distributed to IFTDO members and other HRD practitioners across the Globe.
- Country specific focus groups — with countries as identified by the Delphi-style panel.

Literature Review

A thorough review was conducted of the academic and grey literature available to us at the time. The literature review provided the theoretical underpinning for our study and was organized into three distinct sections: the national and international context of each continent; the further and higher education context and finally, the role of HRD practitioners in the respective continents. Thus, it served to inform the questions we produced for our online questionnaire and focus groups.
Delphi-Style Panel

Our plan was to utilise the guidance of experts in order to identify the most appropriate countries we should target for our focus group data collection. We adopted a Delphi-style approach to this process. Delphi panels are designed to access the perspectives of those identified as experts as a means of guidance in relation to the subject under scrutiny. So, within the context of this study, we initially engaged executive members of IFTDO to identify HRD experts likely to be able to assist us with our decision making regarding the most appropriate countries to target from each of the three continents. However, the number of so called experts involved in this process was smaller than would usually be associated with the Delphi approach. We, thus, identified our approach as adopting a ‘Delphi-style’.

As a result of three ‘rounds’ of questioning, the following countries were decided upon: Ireland, to represent Europe; Nigeria, to represent Africa; India and Taiwan, to represent Asia. UK travel restrictions prevented travel to Nigeria, hence the decision to visit two countries in Asia. It is worth noting at this point that Germany was initially suggested as the country to represent Europe. However, after several unsuccessful attempts to organize focus groups it became apparent that in-depth exploration and investigation into the role of HRD and HRD practitioners, was not regarded as a high priority for the German organisations we contacted. As such, we were unable to recruit any volunteers, suggesting a potential tension between academia and HRD practice.

Online Questionnaire

We developed an online questionnaire comprising 26 questions in total, asking participants to share with us details of their experiences of HRD practice within the countries they were based. We utilized the IFTDO membership distribution list to share the online link to our questionnaire via email with potential participants. We also asked HRD specialists in receipt of this email to forward the questionnaire’s link on to any of their contacts involved with HRD. We used a similar approach with other HRD practitioner contact lists at our disposal. We initially provided a deadline for completion of four weeks after the date of the questionnaire’s distribution. We had hoped for approximately 1,000–2,000 completed questionnaires to be submitted to us by this stage.

Unfortunately, a very small number of questionnaires were completed and submitted. This led us to make the decision to reopen the link to the questionnaire and invite via email participation for a second time. At this stage we provided potential participants with a few additional weeks in which to complete the questionnaire. We reemphasized the importance of participation in this exciting international research project and hoped for better results after the second deadline. We were again very disappointed with the small number (under 30 completed questionnaires in total) of questionnaires submitted after the second deadline had passed.

We were surprised and puzzled by the lack of participation in our research. Whilst we appreciated and understood that questionnaire completion, especially for online questionnaires, was notorious for achieving low completion levels nonetheless we could not work out why we had received fewer than 30 completed questionnaires from across the Globe. Had we been somewhat naive in our assumption that HRD practitioner members of IFTDO and our other HRD practitioner networks would share a vested interest in contributing to the outcome of this important and potentially impactful international study?
We revisited the structure and content of our questionnaire at this point in order to identify any possible reasons for the low response rate. We agreed that the questionnaire’s 26 questions were a reasonable number to expect participants to answer within approximately half an hour. We decided to redistribute the questionnaire for a final time and to express our gratitude in advance for the time and effort participants would be providing us with. Unfortunately, our efforts did not result in any increase in participation.

This significant lack of quantitative data available for our research meant that we needed to rethink our approach to analysis. We decided to continue with the impending focus groups and modify our research methods so as to utilise the completed questionnaire data in the development of our focus groups. However, it was clear that we would not be able to make any generalisations from our questionnaire data, as we had originally hoped we would be able to do.

**Focus Groups**

Two focus groups were conducted in Ireland, by Professor Stewart. Two focus groups were facilitated by Sophie Mills in India. One focus group was conducted by Sophie Mills in Taiwan. One focus group was facilitated by Sophie Mills and took place with Nigerian HRD practitioners via Skype (due to travel restrictions in place at that time).

The support and hospitality we received from each country was very generous and much appreciated. The qualitative data received from focus groups provided us with a very important insight into perceptions of and attitudes toward HRD practice within each of these countries. It was also more noticeable than ever from these focus groups that generalisations across continents within this context would be very difficult, if not impossible, to achieve. However, the data we were able to glean from this part of data collection enabled us to understand better the relationships that were at play between each country’s government, education systems and industries. This encouraged us to consider future opportunities for widening our research to involve the participation of HRD practitioners from many more countries, and also to investigate further differences experienced between sectors.

**On Reflection …**

Our experiences of data collection were varied. The Delphi-style study proved to be a very useful means of identifying the countries upon which we would conduct the ‘deep-dive’ element of our research. The high points of data collection were definitely related to our focus group involvement. We remain indebted to the HRD practitioners involved in putting together and attending these focus groups. They were generous with their time and efforts and we certainly benefitted hugely from their participation.

A significant low point, and perhaps the biggest learning point for us to consider in the extension of this research, has to be associated with lack of HRD practitioner engagement in the completion of our online questionnaire. To what extent did this demonstrate tension between the perspectives of HRD theorists and those of HRD practitioners? Was this perhaps evidence of a dichotomy in existence between efforts associated with academic HRD theory development in contrast/conflict with HRD practice? Even though HRD practitioners within this context claimed generally to be supportive of advancing their understandings of practices associated with employee learning and
development, their interest and, thus, engagement appeared to be somewhat lacking. It seems that without some form of personal commitment in this type of study, HRD practitioners are unlikely to ‘waste their time’ answering a questionnaire.

We have certainly learned that it isn’t enough to send an email and cross our fingers in the hope that HRD practitioners across the world, a) have the time to devote to supporting this type of international research, and b) are inclined to contribute in order to influence our final report. It is felt that in future development of this research we arguably need to consider the possibility of incentivizing participation by maybe offering gift vouchers, raffle prizes or other tangible rewards, to those that agree to complete the questionnaire.

Perhaps it is even worth us contemplating modifying completely the research methods adopted for future development of this research project. A suggestion was made, for example, by an audience member at the 2015 IFTDO World Conference when our initial results were being presented by Sophie Mills. The audience member suggested that we could engage more with representatives from each country not only in the distribution of questionnaires, but also in their development. This, it was posited, would address any potential cultural or language barriers prior to the questionnaire’s distribution. Also, it would be likely to enable us to access far more potential participants, rather than relying on one main source of distribution. Similarly, when Amanda Lee presented a progress update at the 2015 International UFHRD conference, feedback from delegates suggested offering incentives to questionnaire participants could be used to facilitate completion.

Finally, we would like to express our sincere gratitude to those HRD practitioners who did take part in our research. We considered the focus group participation to be a resounding success. We have also been able to effectively utilise the secondary data gleaned from our review of relevant academic and grey literature. A full report of our research findings is due to be released via the IFTDO network shortly.

Our next plan is to gain additional funding to extend our study further to include additional countries, taking with us the lessons we have learned along the way. It is likely that future HRD practitioner engagement in our study will be determined by the level of interaction we can gain in the development of our research.

Note

1. The research team comprised Professor Jim Stewart (Professor of HRD at Coventry University), Amanda Lee (Senior Lecturer in HRM at Coventry University) and Sophie Mills (Senior Lecturer at Coventry University).

The Authors

Amanda Lee is Senior Lecturer in human resource management at Coventry University, with over 12 years’ experience in academia and 15 years’ human resource practitioner experience gained within the National Health Service, construction and retail sectors.

Sophie Mills is Senior Lecturer in human resource management at Coventry University, with over 12 years’ experience in academia and 8 years’ human resource practitioner experience gained within UK Local Government and the security industry.
There are different responses to the statistics and arguments which tell us that most training and development is wasted effort. One is to ignore and carry on with doing what has been done for decades. Another is to heed the advice of the likes of ROI ‘gurus’, such as Jack Philips, and pay more attention to the process of evaluation so as to find out what is working and what less so. Yet another is to question, fundamentally, organization’s stubborn preference for formal, classroom based, training and development. This is the position adopted by Robin Hoyle but he is quick to point out that his central thesis is that “we need good formal learning and effective informal learning”. Indeed he goes a step further arguing that “effective formal trainers encourage, harness and enable informal learning to happen”.

Based on a series of interviews with managers involved in what Hoyle calls the middle ground of informal learning — those who integrate learner directed activity alongside more formal approaches — the book addresses where and how organizations can seek to manage and support informal learning and thereby maximise the opportunities it provides and draw more of the benefits it offers. So, Hoyle attempts to analyse some of the ways in which informal learning happens and draws a critical perspective “seeking to identify the optimum conditions for informal learning within a myriad different workplace challenges”. A strength of the book is that Hoyle situates his analysis within the realities of workplace learning, helping the reader to reflect upon their own experience.

The book is divided into three sections: firstly an overview to make sense of informal learning at work; secondly a critique of the rise of technology as a driver and enabler of informal learning and thirdly, a section devoted to tips and hints about integrating learning and work. It is section 2 which ensures this text makes a real contribution to the growing literature on informal learning. Hoyle is not afraid to confront the rhetoric of the technology led learning revolution. “We are so far away from addressing the various barriers to enable effective engagement with online content that we must start from some fairly basis principles …”. Through well informed case studies — and which are not restricted to section 2 — Hoyle teases out the need to focus our considerations on better application of our understanding of social learning, engagement and collaboration. He draws on the MOOC phenomena, for example to explore the potential — so far largely ignored — to address collaborative technology (blogs, wikis, learning communities, communities of practice) and concludes “there is significant work to do if these technologies are to become mainstream in organizational learning”.

Informal Learning in Organizations: How to Create a Continuous Learning Culture

Robin Hoyle

Kogan Page, 2015
ISBN 978 0 7494 7459 1
The question of whether informal learning can be strategic is a question addressed in the book’s final section. Emphasis is placed on firstly ensuring learning can become a normal part of daily work and secondly, developing “fit for purpose” ways of knowing and understanding that our formal and informal training and development efforts equip the organization for change. The strategic link to informal learning becomes somewhat implicit rather than overtly explored. Nonetheless it is encouraging to hear the author critically questioning the obsession with measurement. Of much greater value to facilitating an organizational sense of confidence in dealing with change are the individual stories of what learning is, “when it happens and how it delivers benefits” and where informal learning may be the critical component.

Robin Hoyles’s book deserves its place as one of the first reviews in the new journal. It tackles a critical issue in HRD practice and does so with well informed research and a keen eye for what makes an accessible read for the HRD practitioner. It will be of value to any HRD professional wherever they are based and whatever their particular focus of HRD practice.
The central thesis of Ford's book is that accelerating technology will ‘disrupt’, radically and fundamentally, global employment and the nature of work. Of course predictions of a jobless future are not new. However, Ford argues that we are approaching a critical ‘tipping point’; one that is poised to make the world economy significantly less labour intensive. It is not simply routine jobs that are most threatened by technology; more accurately it is ‘predictable’ jobs. Computers, argues Ford, are becoming highly proficient at acquiring skills, especially where a large amount of training data is available. Whether you are training to be an airline pilot, a retail assistant, a lawyer or a pharmacist, labour saving technology is whittling away the numbers … and in some cases hugely so.

What makes the book particularly pertinent to the HRD reader are the implications for prevailing assumptions about education, training and skills. A view that education and skills will assure employers and employees of secure and prosperous futures is pervasive; driving HRD policy and practice across the globe. Ford counters this bluntly: “acquiring more education and skills will not necessarily offer protection against job automation in the future”. There are echoes here of Brown and Hesketh’s (2004) searing critique of employability in the so called knowledge economy. These authors explore what happens when the degree begins to lose its badge of distinction. Ford continues the analysis, maintaining that across a raft of occupations graduates have been forced into relatively unskilled jobs, often displacing non graduates in the process.

Interestingly, though, it is higher education, along with healthcare that appears more resistant to the dramatic changes evident elsewhere. Whilst Ford notes the rapid and inexorable rise in ‘on line’ provision in higher education, and which he argues is driving further developments in automated approaches to both teaching and marking, the employment impact, to date, has been minimal. One factor here is a “stumbling” of the MOOC (massive open online course) phenomena, where research highlights minimal engagement with negligible completion rates. Nonetheless, Ford is of the view that the influence of MOOCs will develop and will “slam into an industry” which generates huge revenue and indeed employs large numbers of highly educated workers. However, the analysis here is less than convincing. A key question seems to be whether MOOCs can mature into a major provider of marketable credentials (degrees and competency based qualifications); a question which Ford notes but largely sidesteps. He also doesn’t deal adequately with shifting occupational roles in higher education; away from the classic role of ‘deliverer’ to that of content designer (for an on line audience) and student support (however this is provided). Healthcare, acknowledges Ford, represents an even greater “challenge for the
robots”. Whilst recent applications of artificial intelligence and robotics to the healthcare field are impressive their impact, in terms of the workforce and employment, remains marginal. ‘Big data’, he argues, will continue to have a transformational impact on how healthcare is delivered and managed but the net effect may only be to increase a demand for the ‘personal service’ aspects of medicine and healthcare.

Given these reservations Ford is clearly more comfortable defending his central arguments in the context of the lower end of the jobs hierarchy. An important part of his analysis is what is happening now as well as his predictions for the future. Ford provides a compelling illustration, for example, of the capability of robots to ‘shelf pick’, irrespective of the size and shape of the items. So why are staff at Amazon’s warehouses (paradoxically named fulfilment centres) still scurrying around with their hand held computers to pick the day’s orders? MacDonald’s by the end of the 1990s had developed fully automated processes to make and serve a Big Mac. So why do we still find workers in MacDonald’s flipping burgers? Ford is no economist but he makes a fair stab at arguing that the impact of accelerating technology is already evident in the large numbers of relatively unskilled, low paid jobs within the workforces of the likes of MacDonald’s and Amazon. His argument is that that the nature of work is being impacted hugely by automation. It persists because for the time being it remains a rational business decision but will not persist indefinitely. The technology and the relative cost of the technology “will develop to the point where low wages no longer outweigh the benefits of further automation”.

Ford’s focus is the developed economies of the world and in particular his statistics and evidence are largely drawn from the US and the UK. As a result, only passing reference is made to developing economies. This is disappointing. It befitted such a text to consider the impact of the ‘rise of the robots’ in, say, Africa. Sub Saharan African countries already have unemployment rates above 20%. Young people, increasingly educated, are particularly hard hit. Huajian, one of China’s largest manufacturers of shoes opened a factory in Ethiopia in 2012, largely because of the availability of cheap labour. Its workforce is 3,500, including a not insignificant number of graduates, but where the work is largely unskilled, routinized and Taylorist. Where exactly does such a scenario fit in Ford’s analysis? And how do we interpret such a scenario? To what extent do we bemoan the quality of working life evident in the factory or applaud the investment as provision of waged labour in a state struggling with chronic unemployment? And, critically, for how much longer does such a proposition make economic sense even for the Chinese, when very soon the robots will be able to make the shoes more quickly and more cheaply?

There is no chapter on the ‘implications for HRD’ as such but implicitly the questions for the HRD profession are on every page. Whether or not the more dystopian predictions of Ford, in terms of mass unemployment, prove to be correct is largely irrelevant. Economists may quibble at the finer points of his analysis, but that technology is having an accelerating impact upon the economics of labour and the nature of work is inescapable. What do we (in HRD) do? React to Ford’s book with a grim shake of the head but get on with business as usual? A good place to start is surely to jettison our fixation with the ‘high road’ of HRD and the view that herein lie the main challenges facing HRD. We need to begin raising the awkward questions about HRD’s relationship with job market polarization and the future of work and to consider HRD’s role in a world where the mantra of “in education and skills we trust” may become increasingly tenuous — at least in terms of a route to fulfilling work and career. Ford’s book needs to be widely read by professionals working in HRD. If, as a result, the challenges facing HRD begin to be re-considered and re-configured Ford’s book will have been a contribution of some significance.
The International Journal of HRD Practice, Policy & Research

The International Journal of HRD Practice, Policy & Research is a peer-reviewed journal that brings together international practitioner and academic expertise to support the understanding and practice of human resource development (HRD). Its aim is to create and develop synergies between practice and theory to offer critically reflective practitioners-academics evidence based ideas and insights on the contemporary issues and challenges facing HRD internationally; its impact; and its influence. The journal is sponsored through a partnership between the International Federation of Training and Development Organizations (IFTDO) and the University Forum for HRD (UFHRD).

The editors welcome contributions on a wide range of HRD themes and issues. This includes: the HRD knowledge base (learning, skills, competences); HRD interventions: HRD analytics; HRD and ethics; the professionalization of HRD; vocational educational training policy and practice; issues related to workforce development, generational differences, international and national policy initiatives.

Submission Types

1. Articles of between 4,000 to 7,000 (max) words related to applied research. These articles will report either results of empirical research and / or develop theoretical perspectives. Such articles will contribute to knowledge and understanding about HRD and closely related subject areas.

2. Articles of between 4,000 to 7,000 (max) words related to evidence-based practice. These articles will focus on accounts of practice – interventions, programmes and events – but which can be constructed to make a contribution of interest to a broader HRD practice community. Case study type article are welcome. All such articles should consider impact in terms of factors such as the transfer of learning and implications for the development of HRD practice.

3. Articles of between 4,000 and 7,000 (max) words related to evidence based policy and / or implications for policy both within organizations and at national and international levels. These articles could address, for example, skills policies, strategic workforce development, the labour market, education – work transition, demographic changes and challenges. As with Type 2 submissions, case studies are welcome but also cross cultural comparisons and reviews which move beyond one organisation or country. Articles should be constructed to move beyond description so as to include review, assessment and considered questioning of the policy(ies) under consideration.

Article types 1,2 and 3 will be subject to anonymous peer review by two reviewers.

4. HRD Viewpoints. This section of the journal provides space for more speculative ‘think pieces’, commentaries, viewpoints and reviews. Their purpose is to simulate discussion and debate on current HRD practice, policy and research and consider the future directions of HRD practice, policy and research. Contributions here are not subject to peer review although the Editor / Associate Editors may seek comments and suggestions from members of the Editorial Advisory Board and which would be discussed with the author as part of the editorial process. Think pieces and viewpoints should be between 1,000 and 2,000 words (max). Book reviews should be no more than 500 words, and review articles no more than 2,000 words.

Authors are welcome to discuss their ideas with either the Editor in Chief or any of the Associate Editors. Contact details and full guidelines for submission of papers are available on the Journal’s web site; www.ijhrdppr.com