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ABSTRACT

The first of the papers in this poster session, "Developing the Employment Brand: Targeting MBA Campus Hires" (Diane M. Bergeron), posits that employment branding benefits both individuals and organizations. It functions as a campus recruiting tool in a competitive labor market and communicates the organization's values and work environment to potential applicants. Individuals may be more or less attracted to an organization depending on the extent to which their personal work values are similar to those of the organization. The steps in developing an employment brand are discussed. The session's second paper, "Learning-Action Strategies of Project Managers in a Collaborative Learning Program: An Action Research Project into the Learning Activities of Project Managers" (Rachelle Pluijmen), describes a study that determined which learning action strategies are used by project managers within a learning program. The findings of the research at a training and consultancy center are discussed and individual and cooperative learning action strategies of project managers are viewed from the framework of the learning network theory. The final paper of the session, "Trainer Certification: Research in the Real World" (Marilynn N. Butler) discusses the questionable methodology by which the credentials for trainer certification programs are validated. (Contains 35 references.) (KC)

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Developing the Employment Brand: Targeting MBA Campus Hires

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Employment branding benefits both individuals and organizations. It functions as a campus recruiting tool in a competitive labor market and communicates the organization's values and work environment to potential applicants. Individuals may be more or less attracted to an organization depending on the extent to which their personal work values are similar to those of the organization. The steps in developing an employment brand are discussed.

Keywords: Employment Brand, Campus Recruiting, Work Values

Attracting top talent is one of the biggest challenges facing organizations today. Not only because of the decreasing size of the workforce but also because of the increased competition for the same talent pool. There are a number of trends that threaten a wide-ranging shortage in talent. Baby boomers are beginning to retire in large numbers and the cohort group moving in to take their place, the 35-44 year-olds in the U.S., will decrease by 15% between 2000 and 2015. A survey of over 6,000 corporate executives revealed that 75% said their companies had insufficient human resources and that this talent shortage was hindering their ability for continued growth (Chambers, Handfield-Jones & Michaels, 1998). Compounding the labor shortage problem is an increase in competition for workers. A booming economy has given rise to a large number of small and medium-sized companies. These companies are targeting the same people as the larger firms and are proving to be fierce competition because of their greater opportunity for impact and wealth. Added to this equation is the Department of Labor's prediction that the number of white-collar jobs will increase over the coming years. This is why it is important to stand out in the marketplace and present a unified company image to job candidates.

More and more companies have implemented targeted campus recruiting efforts specifically aimed at hiring MBAs, with some campuses seeing a 40% increase in recruiting activity. Employer image on campus is important because it provides an identity which functions as an attractor for potential MBA applicants. Based on Tajfel's (1978, 1981) social identity theory (SIT), social identification is the perception of membership to some human collective or group. Some principles of social identification are relevant in explaining why individuals identify with organizations and their subsequent attraction to them. The first is that identification is a perceptual cognition not necessarily related to any behaviors or affective states and the second is that individuals personally experience the successes and failures of the group (Foote, 1951). Social identity theory maintains that identifying with specific social categories, such as an organization, enhances one's self-esteem (Tajfel, 1978). Positive employer images are important to job seekers because of the sense of pride they expect on being associated with the organization. People tend to accept jobs at these organizations because of the potential that this association has to enhance their self-esteem (Ashforth & Mael, 1989).

In evaluating organizations for possible employment, job seekers usually have limited information (Rynes, 1991). Because it is difficult to obtain adequate information about the numerous aspects of a job before joining an organization, job seekers will use whatever information is available. Several studies on applicant attraction to firms have found that the amount of information provided positively influences attraction to the organization (e.g., Rynes & Miller, 1983). Individuals may use employer image as additional information in evaluating an organization and the components of the job. Just as consumers use brand images as signals about the quality of a product (Shapiro, 1983), applicants use employer images as signals about job characteristics.

An individual's employing organization is an important aspect of his or her social identity (Ashforth et al. 1989). When a person joins an organization, it makes a statement about the person's values (Popovich & Wanous, 1982). Values are conceptualized as relatively stable individual characteristics, over which organizational socialization is unlikely to have much influence (Lusk & Oliver, 1974). Research on work values is based on the premise that they are derived from people's basic value systems (George & Jones, 1997). A value system is "an enduring organization of beliefs concerning preferable modes of conduct or end-states of existence along a continuum of relative importance" (Rokeach, 1973, p. 5). Values are important because they guide behavior and

provide individuals with criteria against which to characterize their work experiences (Lewin, 1951). Work values are a fundamental aspect of the work experience because they define the meaning that people derive from work, jobs and other organizational experiences (James & James, 1989).

Research on the effects of work values and job choice decisions demonstrates that individuals are more likely to choose jobs whose value content is similar to their own value orientation (Judge & Bretz, 1992). This suggests that the applicant's perception of the attractiveness of an organization may depend on the values that are emphasized within the organization.

Schein (1990) says that dominant themes emerge for each person in the form of critical skills or abilities the person wants to employ or critical needs or values that govern one's orientation towards life. As time goes on, the self-concept begins to act as a guidance system and as an "anchor" that constrains career choices. He defines the career anchor as part of one's stable self-image and is "the one element in a person's self-concept that he or she will not give up, even in the face of difficult choices" (p. 18).

MBA Campus Hires

The incoming labor force, known as Generation X, has a number of distinguishing characteristics that need to be taken into consideration in developing an employment brand. This group has been affected by divorce (40% come from broken homes) and the result is very independent and self-reliant individuals. They are known as the "Entrepreneurial Generation" and have started businesses at more than twice the rate of other American cohort groups. They saw the effect of downsizing on their parents. Because of this they have little or no company loyalty and tend to change jobs frequently. They grew up with racial, ethnic and religious differences and thus are comfortable with diversity. They have a more pragmatic view of employment and feel that by working "smarter, not harder" people can live satisfying lives without sacrificing everything for a career.

In order to be effective, the brand has to be relevant to what the job candidate is seeking. The best way to understand these characteristics is to conduct surveys of MBAs to find out what they most highly value. According to Universum's survey, topping the list are inspiring colleagues, work/life balance, competitive starting compensation, dynamic management and a variety of tasks and assignments. With information about the target group, the brand can then be targeted at the interaction between those characteristics that the company possesses and the characteristics sought by MBA hires.

Employment Branding

Organizational identity is comprised of a shared understanding of the central and unique characteristics of the organization, which can be manifested in qualities such as values and beliefs, mission, structures and processes, and organizational climate (Albert & Whetten, 1985). The SIT literature suggests that the degree to which an organization can differentiate itself from others by providing a unique identity is a way to increase identification. Cable and Turban (2000) demonstrated that recruitment image is positively related to job seekers' evaluations of job characteristics, thus applicants use employer images as signals about job characteristics.

Because of increased competition and the current labor shortage, companies that do not distinguish themselves from their competitors are at a significant disadvantage when it comes to recruiting top people. The question is how a company distinguishes itself from its competitors. The answer lies in "employment branding" – the process of identifying what is unique about a company and marketing it to a target population. Branding has traditionally been used to refer to the process of marketing products. The lessons and principles of product marketing can be used to build and manage an employment brand. Employment branding is the establishment and cultivation of a substantive and unique impression in the minds of target applicants (Buss, 1988). It is a process that enables an organization to define and articulate its distinctive employment proposition relative to the competition. Comprised of the package of functional, economic and psychological benefits identified with the employing company (CLC, 1998), a brand is basically a promise to applicants regarding what it will be like to work for a company. The end game is to ensure that applicants have a clear perception of a company's employment value proposition. In developing a brand, a company is essentially building an ownable position in the marketplace that will provide it with a real competitive advantage in attracting talent to the organization. The relationship between the company and its applicants is based on trust and loyalty generated by consistent delivery of the brand promise (Kahler Holliday, 1997). A company creates its brand over time with strong consistent positioning, packaging and performance. Organizations see the branding of their employment offer as similar to the branding of a product in the marketplace. In this case, the labor market.

The employment brand is comprised of a number of attributes, each of which contributes to the strength of the brand. There are 12 dimensions that constitute the overall employment offer (Clemson, 1998): reward system; post employment; external reputation and awareness; policy and values; fairness and cooperation; corporate culture; communication; recruitment and induction; performance management; development; work environment; vision and leadership.

These twelve factors are taken into consideration in developing the employment brand. Branding is a process built from internal and external strengths as well as job applicant perceptions. If a company does not know its benefits and weaknesses from an employment perspective, the brand will not be based on reality. And if the brand is not based on reality it will not deliver on its promise to applicants. Therefore, in order to be effective, the employment brand must be based on research. Branding is the end point, not the starting point, of the process (Kahler Holliday, 1997).

Developing the Brand

The marketing of a brand is, essentially, making a promise to the applicant that his or her experience will match what is being marketed. In order to meet MBAs' expectations, branding needs to be based on solid research.
The first step in branding involves conducting a competitor analysis. This includes looking at the web sites and recruiting materials of the organization's close competitors (within and outside of the industry) and listing their employment attributes. Competing employment offers should be analyzed to understand what is being offered to job candidates and how it differs from a company's own offer in order to carve out a niche in the labor market. Competitors must be monitored constantly because branding is a statis process. Competitors are continually introducing their own branded employment offers and can use their messages to reduce the effect of other companies' brand value. It is also helpful to obtain the same information that MBAs use in making their job choice decisions (e.g., independent company reports such as Job Vault). The second step is to conduct focus groups of recent campus hires (within the past two years) in the organization to find out the employment value proposition being offered. This is the ideal group because they are familiar with what MBAs want and they are still new enough to the organization to be able to describe the culture. The third step is to conduct individual interviews with recent hires and past summer interns to get additional in-depth information. It is also helpful to ask these individuals about the perceptions of other companies' employment offers. Experienced hires are interviewed to determine what a longer-term career with the company may look like and how to market this to prospective applicants. The fourth step is to obtain any existing survey data that may be available, such as a values survey or employee opinion survey.

The data is then analyzed by company division (if applicable), by data source (focus groups, interviews) and by competitor. A summary of the findings across the sources is compiled to develop a list of common themes that will begin to articulate the attributes of a company's employment offer. The themes are used to develop a tag line and supporting message that encapsulate the employment brand. The tag line should be strong enough to convey something fundamental about the organization. Different functions or departments of the organization should be able to use the tag line and feel it is relevant. It should be vague enough to allow a number of different interpretations so that it is universally appealing.

Employment branding is not about identifying the target group and then changing the brand content to become something the target candidate wants. It is about identifying what the company has to offer, letting the target group know about it and then figuratively asking the candidate if he or she is interested in being a part of that organization. The brand will show candidates how the company is different and will communicate the subtle aspects (e.g., culture, values, quality of coworkers) of what it is like to work there.

Companies should view the packaging of their employment brand in the same manner in which they package their products or services. Part of the branding process consists of using a logo, tag line and supporting visuals to reflect the company's message. The packaging should be consistent across marketing materials (e.g., web site, brochures) in order to continue to build and reinforce the brand. Part of the packaging also includes the candidate's contact with the company. The message should be visible in every point of contact with the candidate – from initial communication to final round interviews. If a candidate sees that the company does not "live its brand" in any of these interactions, then the integrity of the company's message will be called in to question.

Conclusion

Employment branding can function as a recruiting tool that establishes a clear idea in the minds of job applicants as to what an organization is, what it stands for, and what it will provide for them. Just like traditional product marketing, the employment offer must meet applicant preferences, be differentiated from competing offers and have

a strong reputation. Branding involves the creation of an indelible impression on job applicants through branded interactions with them. The impression is meant to be lasting and can build loyalty to a particular company when an applicant is evaluating his or her employment offers. A strong employment brand can be key to attracting talent in a competitive labor market. It is a way for companies to stand out from their competitors and can serve as a symbol that attracts immediate attention in the job market. Creating a brand requires a balance of applicant perceptions and wants, current company employment strengths and potential positionings within the competitive labor market. Building a brand now will ensure a stronger labor market position in the future.

Companies spend substantial effort to market their products but not nearly enough on marketing the company to prospective employees. Branding dollars need to be looked at as an investment in the future of the company and in the value of the employment brand. The aspects of the company that affect the brand need to be integrated in order to work together and deliver on the brand's promise to applicants.

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Learning-Action Strategies of Project Managers in a Collaborative Learning Program: An Action Research Project into the Learning Activities of Project Managers

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This manuscript describes a study concluded in August 2000. The main question in this study is which learning action strategies are used by project managers within a learning program. The findings of the research at a Training and Consultancy Center (TCC) will be discussed. Individual and cooperative learning action strategies of project managers are viewed from the framework of the learning network theory. This theory is described below.

Keywords: Action Research, Collaborative Learning, Managers

The Learning Network Theory

The learning network theory (Van der Krogt, 1995; Poell, 1998; Poell & Van der Krogt, 2000a), centers on learning individuals and learning groups within their learning network and labor network. A learning network describes how learning is organized. A labor networks describes how work is organized. Both networks ranging from a liberal, vertical, horizontal, to an external network.

The learning program theory describes, amongst other things, in what ways a learning coach can organize learning programs, based on insights into and knowledge about the labor and learning networks of the learners. A learning program is created by learning workers, who decide to learn, more systematically than in daily work situations, with a group of colleagues about a theme relevant to their own professional development and to their work, and who obtain legitimacy and means for their activities (Poell & Van der Krogt, 2000a).

The theory includes four theoretical types of learning program: a liberal, a vertical, a horizontal and an external learning program (similar to the four types of learning networks distinguished by Van der Krogt, 1995). All of these contain specific arrangements about the content and the organization of learning programs.

A liberal learning program is characterized by contractual and individual orientated learning. Individual learners create their own unique learning program through organizing learning activities. The learning group in which these individuals take place is intended to be of surplus value to each individual learner.

A vertical learning program is characterized by linear planning of learning activities by a learning coach. A learning group agrees to enrol in a pre-designed learning program based on and corresponding to organizational policy. The learning coach takes full responsibility in responding to learners' learning styles and in the promotion of learning program effectiveness.

In a horizontal learning program a learning group functions as a semi-autonomous team, solving a complex and shared work problem. The learning coach adjusts his contribution in the learning program to the various needs of the learning group. Each valuable contribution and all the various insights, modes of expertise and qualities of all participants are utilized equally to generate the best manageable solution.

In an external, innovative learning program professionals learn about externally-designed innovations and methods. The profession's insights, knowledge, norms, and codes are translated to and tried out in the work activities of professionals. The outcomes of the learning program are then transferred to the professionals with the cooperation of continuing education institutions.

In learning programs various types of learning activities are combined, which makes each program unique. Various learning activities are related to various work contexts. In other words each learning group creates their own program specific to the organization. Obviously the learning programs differ with regard to their content. The content profile is completely adjusted to the progressive formulation of the work problem by the participants and the progression of the program.

In defining or facilitating learning program creation it is important and valuable for the learning coach and the participants to gain knowledge about the existing learning network and labor network. This knowledge will

support the coach to use the most suitable strategy in organizing that particular learning program to increase transfer of knowledge into work situations. A strategy of a coach, in turn, can fit closely to the existing networks. It is also possible, and moreover in some situations tactical, to choose deliberately a different type of learning program in order to stimulate innovative developments in the learning network and the labor network of an organization.

Problem Statement and Research Questions

This study is based on the following main question:

How are learning programs related to the existing learning and labor networks of an organization?

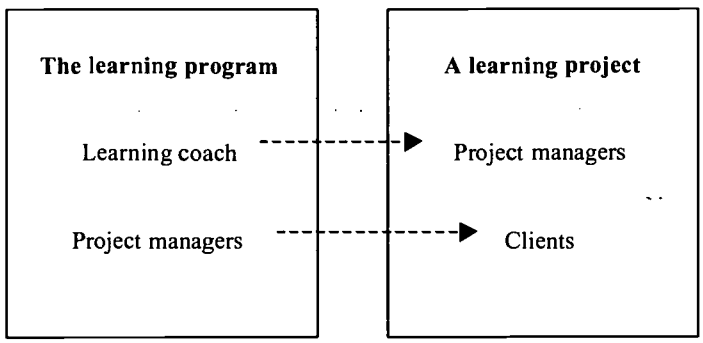
Based upon this main question the following specific research questions were examined:

1a. How can the labor network of the organization be characterized?
1b. How can the learning network of the organization be characterized?
2a. Which learning activities do the participants conduct, both individually and cooperatively?
2b. Which learning action strategies do the participants use?
2c. How can the learning program (in terms of theoretical types of learning programs) be characterized?

Design and Research Method

The method used for this study was an action research approach. A learning program was organized together with five project managers in a Training and Consultancy Centre (TCC).
Project managers at TCC organize various learning projects for clients. TCC occupies itself with consultancy, training, courses and supervision.
In this learning program, both the project managers and the learning coach learned about organizing projects.

Figure 1. The visualization of the roles of the participants in the learning program, compared with the roles of these participants in learning projects in daily work.



The learning program and its constituting learning activities undertaken by the project managers were examined through an action research approach. Characteristic of this approach is its cyclical course. Information gained during a meeting, was analyzed and the results were returned frequently to the project managers in order to improve the organizational structure and content profile of the learning program. Then, again, information was gained in the next meeting.

This action research consisted of two main parts of research.

Part one was defining the existing learning and labor networks of the organization with the participants. Based upon this knowledge the learning coach planned a strategy together with the project managers to organize the actual learning program. Part two was examining the learning activities undertaken and exploring the strategies of the participants underlying these activities.

1. The information about the learning network and the labor network at TCC was collected using the following methods:

- Analysis of documents, reports and internal papers;
- Analysis of visualizations of the learning and labor networks created by the participants.

The information was recorded in extensive protocols which were analyzed in terms of the learning network theory. The learning network and labor network of the organization were thus given a preliminary characterization, which was then discussed in the learning group.

2. The information about the learning activities and underlying learning action strategies was collected using the following method:
3. Reflective feedback sessions at the end of all plenary meetings in the learning program, in which the learning activities of the learners, both individual and cooperative, were discussed explicitly.

The information was recorded in extensive protocols which were analyzed in terms of the learning program theory. The learning program was thus given a preliminary characterization, which was then discussed in the learning group.

Results

In order to answer the main question of the study the two specific research questions were answered first.

The Labor Network

The labor network of TCC was characterized as a liberal labor network and to some extent as an external labor network. The project managers act as autonomous individuals in the organization. They organize their own work based on requests from customers to organize various projects. Each project is unique, has unique content profiles and its own structure. The project managers organize these projects independently and use their own work-action strategies.

The labor network is to some extent an external network, which means that project managers, when interested and motivated, let innovations and new insights from various domains of knowledge influence their work-action strategies and their norms and values. The 'profession of project managers' is rather powerless.
Within the organization stimulated by the management, to a large extent, there is a tendency towards a vertical labor network. Knowledge is codified in various procedures. Again, the employees use these procedures only pragmatically.

The Learning Network

The learning network of TCC can be characterized as a liberal, unstructured learning network. With the situation as it stands, the project managers take responsibility in undertaking their own learning activities, which results in a wide range of learning action strategies being employed. The requests of the costumers are the most important motives behind learning. In this situation constant motivation and a willingness to learn are preconditions for actualizing knowledge and anticipating developments in the work field.

In the learning network also, management is encouraging various developments. To make use of all the available, mostly implicit, knowledge by all employees, management facilitates learning in heterogeneous learning groups. In terms of the learning network theory this tendency can be characterized as verticalization/horizontalization.

Strategy of the Learning Coach

The analysis of the learning network and labor network resulted in two characterizations and insights about possible developments in the networks. As things stand both networks are to a large extent liberal networks.
Considering these outcomes and the developments desired by management, the learning coach decided to follow a horizontal learning program strategy. He aimed for a semi- autonomous learning group resolving a collective work problem together in the learning program. Continuously the learning group would negotiate about problem-solving strategies, ideas and solutions. All participants would agree to collective decisions.

During the course of the learning program the coach stimulated the project managers to assess the content profile of the program and with it find out in what ways the content could be learned best. In that connection the five project managers indicated how the coach could best connect his role to these ways of learning desired by the learning group.

During all the plenary meetings the coach explicitly brought 'unusual' learning activities to the attention to inspire the project managers. For example, prepare a conversation for acquisition together and acquire the instruction together, and reflect on the conversation to increase one's skills in acquiring.

Learning Activities

All meetings ended with a brief period of reflection. In these moments the learning in the learning program by all participants was brought to the attention, as well as the learning activities during the plenary meetings and afterwards. The learning activities concerned both individual and cooperative activities.

With regard to the learning activities mostly individual learning activities were found. The project managers utilized the plenary meetings to learn together about organizing learning programs, exchanged various insights, knowledge, experiences and developments and discussed about frequent work problems, barriers, and strategies. Knowledge and insights gained were used in their own practice in order to improve their own expertise and professional qualities. It never occurred to the project managers to use knowledge and new insights gained in learning situations in the workplace, neither individually nor cooperatively. The project managers prepared the learning topics individually before entering the plenary meetings.

The learning strategy used by the project managers can be characterized as independent, self-directed learning.

As for cooperative learning activities it is noticable that the project managers in this specific learning program did not undertake any activities cooperatively.

There is a difference between learning together and learning cooperatively. The project managers learned together during the meetings but they never discussed a theme in order to give the findings a real try-out, reflect on it, learn and give it a try again.

In daily work, learning cooperatively happens more frequently. The learning-action strategy they used is characterized by starting with an experienced (collective) work problem.

Circumstances which interfered with cooperative learning are lack of free time, outdoor work, pressure of work calendars filled with appointments with one's costumers and employees working part time.

Management decided to arrange for eight fixed office days in order to facilitate cooperative activities.

The learning program at large can be characterized a liberal learning program. The program was systematically organized by the learning coach. The horizontal learning program he intended changed, under the influence of the actions of the project managers in the learning program, into a more liberal learning program.

Reasoning through the learning program certainly experienced a great influence by the powerful liberal networks of TCC.However, the project managers learned a lot about organizing projects with their clients. They gained a useful set of dos and don'ts and points of special interests concerning the organization of learning programs.

Conclusion

This study contributes to new HRD knowledge in several ways.

This study has yielded insights into the relation between learning programs and existing learning and labor networks of an organization. The strategy of the learning coach, although connected to the existing learning and labor networks and their developments, was influenced strongly by the learning action strategies of the participants. Obviously these learning action strategies, and the existing learning and labor networks, were dominating over the strategy of the coach. Thus, for the learning coach who is organizing learning programs, it is important to be aware of this phenomenon. The theoretical framework is useful to point this out and correct the strategy of the learning coach in (the nick of) time.

The second contribution lies in the experiences gained with the action research method.

Action research, compared to 'traditional' ways of research, is a labor-intensive way of doing research. On the other hand there are these is intensive interaction with and great involvement of the learning group. The learners in turn learn actively. It is obviously not a learning process to the researchers only. The final outcomes are fully endorsed by the participants and transferred within the organization by these employees.

Third, the use of the learning network theory has yielded new insights into the organization of workplace learning programs.

The last contribution to HRD knowledge are new insights in the relation between learning programs and existing learning networks and labor networks. The study has brought us one step further in the direction of a

method to organize learning programs well adjusted to the way work and learning are organized in a particular organization.

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Trainer Certification: Research In the Real World

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The ibstpi Standards provide the foundation for trainer certification programs. For some, successful completion of this certification examination is a requirement for employment while failure may lead to job termination. Credentials bearing the authority to determine employment or employment selection are assumed to be sound and legally defensible--legitimate. To ensure legitimacy—validity--of certification credentials, content validity is required. This paper discusses the questionable methodology by which these credentials are validated.

Keywords: Professional Certification; Trainer Certification; Content Validity

Introduction

Professional certification is one way of communicating to "someone" that an individual is allegedly competent in "something." Certification programs provide an avenue for many professionals and practitioners who work in a multitude of occupations and industries to convey to potential employers and clients that they exercise efforts to "keep up" with the changes and advancements in their area of expertise. To be "certified" suggests accountability, proficiency, professionalism, and status—all good reasons to support certification programs. Nevertheless, commanding widespread respect and credibility requires certification programs to be meaningful and built with substance—validated substance.

As the world of professional certification grows at a seemingly exponential rate, legal, professional, and ethical ramifications must be considered. Specifically, professional industrial trainers (such as technical or professional development trainers) are frequently required by their industry or employers to be "certified" instructors. Here, certified may mean that the trainer must have a credential that qualifies them to train in a specific content area. Or, it may mean that the trainer has earned a credential that communicates their ability to instruct and facilitate learning. In some situations, employers require their trainers to be certified in both content area and in instructional practice. In any case, to most people, the word "certified" is interchangeable with the word "competent."

Competence is typically based on what is considered to be accepted standardized practice or knowledge. Methods used to measure competence are often variable, subjective and situational. Nevertheless, recognized certification examinations designed to measure the level of one's competence do exist and are based on established standards. When a specific certification (e.g., trainer certification) becomes a requirement for employment, a recruitment tool, or at the very least, a "strongly recommended credential," the stakes for the certification test taker become extremely high. Passing or failing the examination may mean the difference between employment or unemployment, recruitment or not, promotion or demotion. In this light, certification takes on a meaning that goes beyond building one's portfolio or adding something to the resume. It becomes a matter of survival. One would assume that the standards on which this type of certification program/examination is based have been established through rigorous activity and sound research methodology. Certification examinations are frequently subject to legal scrutiny and must ensure that the content is valid, accurate information.

Validating certification program/test substance (content) requires empirically sound research. Here, the methodology must be in tact. Components such as sampling techniques, sample identification, sample size, and rate of response are critical. If any of these components are not managed appropriately or become problematic in any way, a study becomes flawed and the results corrupt.

Standards, Competencies, and Trainer Certification

The *ibstpi Instructor Competencies (The Competencies)* serve as the basis of established industrial trainer certification programs. The empirical quality of the research and methodology employed to validate *The*

Competencies for the purpose of certification test development and implementation is questionable. *The Competencies* were established by the International Board of Standards for Training Performance and Instruction (ibstpi) and "...are a result of research into available literature, internal corporate documents, observations, peer reviews, and evaluation" (ibstpi, 1993, p. 2). "The *Instructor Competencies* define the generic instructor role, independent of settings and organizations" (ibstpi, 1993, p. 2). To date, these standards have not been tested under rigorous empirical scrutiny for content validity or to determine whether or not they are a global representation of instructor competencies necessary for successful instructor-led-training by country or by culture.

Content validity. The *Standards for Educational and Psychological Testing (SEPT)* (1985) is a comprehensive technical guide that provides criteria for the evaluation of tests, testing practices, and the effects of test use. The application of the *SEPT* (1985) to credentialing programs such as trainer certification programs is appropriate and necessary. The *SEPT* (1985) were developed jointly by the American Psychological Association (APA), the American Educational Research Association (AERA), and the National Council on Measurement in Education (NCME). The guidelines presented in the *SEPT* (1985) have, by professional consensus, come to define the necessary components of quality testing. As a consequence, a testing program that adheres to the *SEPT* (1985) is more likely to be judged valid and defensible than one that does not.

The two categories of criteria within *SEPT* (1985) are primary and secondary. Those standards classified as primary "should be met by all tests . . . . unless a sound professional reason is available to show why it is not necessary, or technically feasible, to do so in a particular case. Test developers and users . . . are expected to be able to explain why any primary standards have not been met" (AERA, APA, & NCME, 1985, p. 2). One of the primary standards is that the content domain of a certification test should be defined in terms of the importance of the content for competent performance in an occupation. "Job analyses provide the primary basis for defining the content domain" (p. 64).

The validation process known as job analysis (also known as role delineation, practice analysis, or functional analysis) is used to define the content domain as a critical component in establishing the content validity of certification examinations. Content validity is the primary validation strategy used in these examinations. It refers to the extent to which the content covered by an examination overlaps with the important components of a job (tasks, knowledge, and/or skills) (Arvey & Faley, 1988).

Demonstration of content validity is accomplished through the judgments of subject-matter experts. The process is enhanced by the inclusion of large numbers of subject-matter experts who represent the diversity of the relevant areas of expertise (Ghiselli, Campbell, & Zedeck, 1981; Tannenbaum & Wesley, 1993). The lack of a well-designed job analysis is frequently cited (by the courts) as a major cause of test invalidity (Kuehn, Stallings, & Holland, 1990).

Validation research based on job analysis methodology refers to the process designed to obtain descriptive information about the tasks performed on a job and/or the knowledge and skills thought necessary to adequately perform those tasks (Gael, 1983). The specific type of information collected for a job analysis is determined by the purpose for which the information will be used. For purposes of developing certification examinations, a job analysis should identify the important knowledge or skills necessary to protect the public (AERA, APA, & NCME, 1985) – the public here being defined as the consumers of services or products provided by professionals, such as instructors (trainers). In addition, well-designed validation research should include the participation of various subject-matter experts (Mehrens, 1987; Tannenbaum & Wesley, 1993); and the data collected should be representative of the diversity within the job. Diversity refers to regional or job context factors and to subject-matter-expert factors such as race/ethnicity, experience, and gender (Kuehn et al., 1990).

Questionable Research: Case in Point

In a recent examination of *The Competencies*, the proposed methodology to conduct the "content validity" study was to be a survey of 500 randomly chosen subject-matter experts. A job analysis survey was developed and piloted. The targeted sample was to consist of domestic and international professionals in academic and business & industry fields. Specifically, respondents were asked to include a cross-section of professionals who specialized in the areas of instructional practice, design, development and delivery. Survey respondents were to be asked whether or not the competencies defined by *The Competencies* are exemplary of those decisions, actions and behaviors that competent instructors must demonstrate to complete an instructional assignment successfully.

Eventually, instead of following the originally planned methodology, the survey was posted on two Websites and was made available to passersby at various international conferences which attract primarily technical

trainers and industrial training vendors. Through this form of convenience sampling, data were collected for approximately one year. Less than 100 (96) surveys were completed and documented.

Convenience sampling is an inappropriate sampling technique for this type of study. A form of non-probability sampling, convenience sampling consists of a group of individuals that is ready and available. Here, the sample is opportunistic and voluntary participants may be unlike most of the constituents in the target population (Fink, 1995). This form of data collection presents numerous limitations and yields weak, biased, and potentially counterfeit information. Moreover, by posting this survey on marketing Website, it is impossible to be certain of who the survey takers are.

A low response rate, flawed sampling and inappropriate data collection methods corrupt these data bringing question to the validity of the standards as certification test content.

Conclusion

Certification program are everywhere. Training and HRD professionals are being presented with opportunities to become certified in virtually every area of the field. To certify or not to certify--that is only one of the questions. Certification opponents may dislike the existence of this type of credentialing practice, but their objections have not stopped the excessive growth. Proponents aid in the development and growth of this now lucrative "industry," but may not be fully aware of the existing weak foundations. The proponent side of the issue may, in fact, contribute to the existing problems by not questioning or researching the foundations of the programs they support.

In all fairness, the ibstipi Standards do make sense as basic guidelines. They are an adequate representation of generic instructional practices. However, they lack sound empirically based substantiation on which to build certification programs that are widely recognized in industry and have been deemed critical and essential in the field of training and instruction.

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P-1

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P-2

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