

Career Development Within HRD: Foundation or Fad?

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This article examines the evolving nature of Human Resource Development (HRD) as reflected in changes in one of the component parts often associated with HRD – career development (CD). Recent developments within career development such as a focus on employability, the boundaryless career, and free agent workers are discussed. New directions for career development, including the role of informal learning, integrative life planning, and the focus on systems theory as a link between both fields, lead to the conclusion that CD can and should be a foundation for HRD.

Keywords: Career Development, Foundations of HRD, New Directions in HRD

Human resource development (HRD) scholars and practitioners have frequently identified career development (CD) as one of the key components, or critical areas, underlying the field (McLagan, 1989; Swanson & Holton, 2001; Weinberger, 1998). Moreover, Ralphs and Stephan (1986) surveyed HRD departments in Fortune 500 companies and reported that the four main HRD activities in those organizations were considered to be: organization development, training and development, human resource planning, and career development. More recently, Bartlett, Kowske and Anthony (2003) examined Web sites of 247 of the Fortune 500 companies and found that over half mentioned career development, even if only briefly. This evidence seems to lead to the conclusion that career development is of interest to HRD scholars and practitioners and, thus, one of the foundational components of HRD.

However, in examining HRD research, and as mentioned by other authors, career development does not receive much attention from HRD scholars (Boudreaux, 2001; McDonald, Hite & Gilbreath, 2002; Upton, Egan & Lynham, 2003). A review of conference proceedings of the Academy of Human Resource Development of the last three years revealed only two articles related to career development in the 2003 proceedings, one in 2002, and three in the 2001 conference proceedings. Moreover, in a foundational text on HRD, Swanson & Holton (2001) acknowledged, “career development is often overlooked as a contributor to HRD” (p. 312).

An examination of curriculum content in HRD and HR programs paints an even worse picture. Kuchinke (2002) reported that career development is taught in less than half of the core or required curricula of graduate HRD programs in the USA. An analysis of content areas covered in U.S. American graduate HR programs showed that career management or development is required at only one of the 76 universities surveyed and one other program offered it as an elective course (Madsen, Musto & Hall, 2003). In conclusion, even though career development is often defined as a foundational component of HRD, it is underrepresented in the literature in the field as well as in the education of our future scholars and practitioners.

One reason for this, as reported by Upton, Egan and Lynham (2003), might be the lack of literature with a focus on the common ground between HRD and career development. Another reason could be that HRD is more focused on performance improvement and learning on the organizational and systems levels than on the individual level (Upton, Egan, & Lynham, 2003). Furthermore, macro-level forces, such as technological and economic forces, coupled with changing workforce demographics, changed the nature of work and modified the concept of career drastically over the last ten or so years (ACES, 2000; Brown, 1996, 1997, 1998a, 1998b; Feldman, 2002; Hall, 1996; Howard, 1995; Judy & D’Amico, 1997; Sullivan, 1999). As a result, the responsibility for the development of careers has shifted from an organizational centric design to an individual centric design. Individuals must now take control of their own career development (Leana, 2002; Sullivan, 1999; Swanson & Holton, Upton, Egan & Lynham, 2003). These changes in the nature of work have had a significant impact on the theory and practice of career development.

It appears that in the midst of all this change, HRD scholars and practitioners have lost sight of an important field to draw upon for their theory building and development of practice. Although individuals are ultimately responsible for their own career development in the new workplace, organizations remain the context in which this development has to take place. This author agrees with Conlon (2003) that “organizations create the climate and influence career decisions for the individual, whether by design or not” (p. 489). Therefore, I will argue that career development should be a foundation for HRD and not some fad that is insignificant to the discipline.

The purpose of this paper is to examine the evolving nature of HRD as reflected in changes in one of its components - career development. First, a short overview of career development, including definitions, history, and

the specific focus on adults, will be provided. Next, the changing nature of work and its impact on the focus and availability of career development opportunities in organizations is discussed. In addition, this article explores how these changes in the nature of work have resulted in new visions on the concept of career and the employer-employee relationship. Furthermore, foci for career development within the new employee-employer relationship are highlighted. As a final point, recommendations for future directions in research in the field of career development and its relationship with HRD are presented.

Career Development: Definitions and Focus

Definition

Upton, Egan, and Lynham (2003) examined 30 different definitions of career development that covered 48 dependent variables. These variables ranged from individual outcomes, e.g. achieved career objectives and development of a self-concept to organizational and societal outcomes, e.g. increased organizational performance and aligned organizational talent with individual career needs. One of the definitions of career development listed by Upton, Egan, and Lynham (2003) is the definition by Boudreaux (2001). She described career development in terms of fit between organizational and individual goals, noting that "Career development focuses on the alignment of individual subjective career aspects and the more objective career aspects of the organization in order to achieve the best fit between individual and organizational needs as well as personal characteristics and career roles" (p. 806).

This definition of career development will be used in this article because the focus of this definition is on both the individual and the organization. Many of the definitions described by Upton, Egan, and Lynham (2003) were more geared to the self-development of an individual, but missed the organizational perspective. Since performance improvement on both the organizational and individual level is central to HRD, Boudreaux's (2001) definition seemed an appropriate definition for career development within the context of HRD.

History and Focus

Historically, career development practice stems from vocational guidance. The shift from an agricultural economy to an industrial system increased the need for people to identify and access emerging jobs. Career development in that time focused on helping the individual choose their profession. It was not until the Twentieth-century that career development also started to include the effectiveness of career development interventions across a wide range of organizational settings and populations (Herr, 2001). Therefore, the term career development has come to describe two sets of theories, or conceptual domains.

The first set of theories focuses on the development of career behavior across the life span and concentrates on matching individuals to jobs and providing occupational information. This approach is also called career counseling or career planning. The second set of theories, sometimes called organizational career development or career management, explains how career behavior is changed by certain (organizational) interventions. Career management is an organizational level approach that addresses human resource needs of the organization and connects these with individual career plans and development needs (ACES, 2000; Boudreaux, 2001; Gutteridge, Leibowitz & Shore, 1993; Hall, 1996; Herr, 2001).

Career development, as used in this article, will focus on organizational career development. Career planning theories focusing on choosing a first career for high school or college students are not as relevant to HRD since this target group traditionally falls outside the boundaries of HRD. On the other hand, theories with regard to adult development are especially relevant to HRD because these give scholars and practitioners insight in the different career stages through which adults progress (Swanson & Holton, 2001). Organizational career development theories should focus the interaction between individual and organization, and can also be regarded as change theories on an individual level, which make them central to HRD (Swanson & Holton, 2001).

Beyond the Individual and the Organization: Forces Influencing Career Development

According to systems theory, the forces at work in the macro environment inevitably have an effect on the individual employee within the organization (Swanson & Holton, 2001). Advancements in technology, changing workforce demographics, and expanding global markets influence the skills one needs to advance in a career, but also the way a career is developed (Coovert, 1995; Feldman, 2002; Howard, 1995; Madsen, 2001; Sullivan, 1999; Van der Spiegel, 1995). For example, economic conditions and the health of particular sectors of the economy influence individual's career opportunities and constraints. Moreover, as Feldman (2002) noticed, "the effect of macro-level forces may even be greater on individual's perceptions of the desirability of various career opportunities" [...] than the influence of the immediate nuclear family on career development (p. 8). Leana (2002) also acknowledged that external markets have become the primary factor in career development decisions. From

training opportunities to the very existence of jobs, it all depends on external market forces. In this section, three important forces that influenced the field of career development over the past few years will be discussed. These are the gap in career development opportunities between professionals and nonexempt employees, the winner-take-all economy, and the potential national role for career development.

Professional vs. Nonexempt Employees.

One of the basic principles of career development should be that career development is for everyone, not just for high potentials (McLean, 2002). However, McDonald, Hite, and Gilbreath (2001) called attention to the fact that nonexempt employees are often overlooked in career development and HRD. Access to developmental activities has traditionally been limited to managerial talent, who are viewed as the most valuable human resource. There seems to be an implicit assumption that nonexempt employees do not have careers--they have jobs. Even now, the assumption prevails that nonexempt employees have no significant long-term aspirations that need to be addressed by career development staff. McDonald, Hite & Gilbreath (2001) illustrated the falsity of this assumption and identified three themes important for nonexempt employees, that deserve the attention of both career development and HRD specialists. These are: (1) the work itself (e.g. challenge, variety, accomplishment) (2) climate issues (e.g. relationship with colleagues, being appreciated, having input), and (3) security/ compensation/ benefits (e.g. job security, good pay/benefits, flexible work schedules).

Moreover, with the current mass lay-offs, the fear of finding a job in the first place has prevailed over concerns about career opportunities, but this will change in the future. Even then, when unemployment numbers drop, the problem of employee matching remains. The “right” people for the job may not be those who are seeking employment (Howard, 1995; Judy & D’Amico, 1997). Yet, it is this group of employees – usually nonexempt workers- that is often overlooked in career development and HRD efforts (Leana, 2002; McDonald, Hite & Gilbreath, 2001; McLean, 2002). In summary, future efforts of career development specialists should focus on raising awareness that career development is important for everyone, not just for high potentials and upper management.

Winner-take-all Markets

Lack of career development opportunities for certain groups of employees might also be due to the so-called winner-take-all markets, as described by Leana (2002). In these markets, those at the top receive astronomical rewards often at the expense of those slightly below the top tier. “Such markets operate like those for professional athletes where the difference between being first place or second is enormous in terms of the rewards being received, even if there are no real discernable differences between the two in actual skill and talent” (Leana, 2002, p. 279). One of the consequences for career development is that in order to compete in a winner-take-all market, only the best of the best will be considered to compete at the top in certain professions. This is an important fact to take into consideration when choosing a vocation or changing careers.

As said before by McDonald, Hite & Gilbreath (2001) career development and HRD specialists should increase their attention to release the untapped potential within the workforce in the non-managerial jobs in order to decrease this gap. If HRD and career development truly want to make a contribution on a national level – as will be discussed in the next section – they must not accept the widening of the gap between the “haves” and “have-nots”.

A National Role for Career Development

Career development and HRD share a common characteristic that goes beyond their focus on matching individual and organizational needs. That is, both fields have the potential to influence the economic health and the knowledge and skills of its workforce on a national scale. As Herr (2001) states: “the importance of career development in the twenty-first [century] will grow as a world-wide, sociopolitical force designed to facilitate the economic health of nations and the purpose and productivity of individuals”(p. 209). Moreover, the Association for Counselor Education and Supervision (ACES) identified that a philosophy of career development is “preparing people for work to help nations build or keep the competitive economic edge in the global market place (p. 5). This claim reveals a close link between career development and HRD. Looking at the definition of HRD by McLean and McLean (2001), we see many similarities in the contribution and objectives of both fields that include benefits on a national level. McLean and McLean’s (2001) definition of HRD is: “Human Resource Development is any process or activity that, either initially or over the long term, has the potential to develop adults’ work-based knowledge, expertise, productivity and satisfaction, whether for personal or group/team gain, or for the benefit of an organization, community, nation or, ultimately, the whole of humanity” (p. 322).

Future research is needed to explore in more detail how career development and HRD are influenced by society and how both fields, in turn, can influence the development of knowledge and skills for the benefit of nations as a whole. This expansion of the definition and role of HRD and career development beyond the individual and organizations shows great promise in getting HRD and career development on the national agenda.

The Changing Nature of Careers

The review above demonstrates that macro change forces influence career development. The most significant change seems to be the shift in responsibility for career development. Organizations no longer take the responsibility to protect their employees from market fluctuations, expecting their workers to take control of their own careers (Leana, 2002; Upton, Egan & Lynham, 2003; Feldman, 2002). Concepts that try to work within the new boundaries of the employer-employee relationship— employability and the boundaryless career— will be discussed in this section.

Employability

With the shift in responsibility for career development from the organization to the individual, the concept of employability is receiving increasing attention in the literature (Baruch, 2001; Brown, 1996, 1998; Howard, 1995; Short & Opengart, 2001). What the term means is that the organization will give employees tools to expand their employability (i.e. make them attractive to other employers), so it will be easier to find a job in case of downsizing (Baruch, 2001). The positive consequence of employability is that it creates self-reliant workers and a career resilient workforce (Brown, 1996). Employees take charge of their own careers; they contribute skills aligned with business needs and are committed to continuous learning (Brown, 1996). The question remains, is this a voluntary movement or is it an offer one can not refuse since one's job is at stake? Fear for one's job is a very strong motivator (Baruch, 2001). Introducing employability as a new concept assumes that organizations in the past did not offer tools for their employees to remain up to date with regard to their knowledge and skills. This is not the case; organizations have always been providing training and development for their employees. Baruch (2001) warns that although employability might be beneficial for individuals – it is advantageous to be employable in turbulent markets – employability cannot be a replacement for organizational commitment. Employability is a concept that needs further research within the context of career development and HRD. It seems evident that the responsibility for career development lies with the employee now, and this will not change in the near future. The question remains, what is the role of the organization in facilitating the employability of their employees?

Boundaryless Careers

Traditional careers where people climbed the organizational ladder gaining income, power, security and status are gone (Feldman, 2002; Hall, 1996; Sullivan, 1999). Instead, “many individuals are traveling career paths that are discontinuous and go beyond the boundaries of a single firm” (Sullivan, 1999, p. 464). The idea of a ‘job for life’ has been replaced with ‘survival of the fittest’ as downsizing has forced employees to develop their own career plans (Loughlin & Barling, 2001, as cited in Conlon, 2003). Changes in the psychological contract between organizations and employees have given rise to the idea of boundaryless or protean careers (Sullivan, 1999). Since organizations cannot offer job security any longer, people need to take charge of their own careers. Consequently, careers are being viewed as boundaryless in the career development literature (Arthur and Rousseau, 1996). Boundaryless careers, as described in Sullivan (1999) have the following characteristics. They (1) transition across occupational boundaries, (2) transition across organizational boundaries, (3) transition across the boundaries between roles, (4) transition across boundaries within roles (e.g. increased responsibilities), (5) have changed meanings of employment, relationships, and (6) depend on network relationships. Even though the majority of people might still have a “traditional” career at the moment, the concept of the boundaryless career will most probably play an important part in the future of career development and HRD. More knowledge is needed on how career development specialists can assist employees in dealing with this new type of career.

Free Agent Workers

Free agent workers seem to make up the other side of the coin for boundaryless careers. Free agents are those employees “who focus on their long-term employability security within the new career model, without seeing themselves as bound to any one organization” (Short & Opengart, p.813). Thus, free agents are most likely employees who have a boundaryless careers (Imel, 2001; Short & Opengart, 2001). Much can be learned from free agents and future research will have to provide insight on what the specific needs and demands are of free agent workers with regard to career development. The development of networks has been proposed as a career development strategy for free agents, but more research is needed (Imel, 2001).

New Directions for Career Development in Organizations

Even though the responsibility for career development has shifted from the employer to the employee, this does not mean that the organizations do not have any responsibilities anymore for the development of their workforce. Organizations create a climate, one that supports learning or not, and influence career decisions of employees through several different means (e.g. pay and benefits). In short, career development should remain a shared

responsibility (Boudreaux, 2001; Brown, 1997). Economic forces may have caused training and development budgets to be cut severely, but there are other possibilities that career development and HRD can explore to achieve the best fit between individual and organizational needs as well as personal characteristics and career roles, such as informal learning and learning opportunities within the workplace.

Role of Informal Learning

Informal learning techniques are convenient and accessible. Coupled with findings that as much as 70% of employees' learning needs are fulfilled by informal learning, the concept needs further attention from scholars (Power, Hubschman, & Doran, 2001). Informal learning can take place in many different settings, even in more formal activities, such as "lessons learned" sessions, developmental assignments, and on-the-job coaching (McCauley & Hezlett, 2001; Power, Hubschman, & Doran, 2001). Power, Hubschman, & Doran (2001) have proposed a model to re-create career development via informal learning. In this model the HRD professional acts as "the filter or catalyst who assists, through the reframing process, employees in enhancing their career development skills in improved goal setting and visioning, resulting in whole person learning for the employee and enhanced performance for the organization" (p. 826). In times of economic down turn, when development budgets are small, informal learning shows great promise to continue to create a learning culture and social support for learning in a more informal setting.

Learning Opportunities and Learning Behavior

With the expanding role of informal learning, organizations need to ensure there are ample learning opportunities created for employees within the organization (McCauley & Hezlett, 2001; Power, Hubschman, & Doran, 2001). Van der Sluis & Poell (2003) examined the impact of learning opportunities and learning behavior at work and found that "career development depends both on the work environment in terms of learning opportunities and on individual characteristics in terms of learning behavior" (p. 174). Individual learning behavior has an impact on career development, which is in line with the traits of the new free agent workers, as discussed above. Van der Sluis & Poell (2003) also found a link between a supportive job environment and the career satisfaction of employees. They conclude that employees appreciate feedback on their performance and are more aware of their own responsibility for their learning and professional development. In sum, the role of learning theory in career development should be a focus of future research on the crossover between individual and organizational learning.

Integrative Life Planning

Professional organizations (ACES, 2000; NCDA, 2000) urge career development specialists to see career development as a developmental process that is lifelong and contextual in nature. Changes in the world of work result in new attitudes about work, family, and leisure. Career development professionals need to understand that these issues are often link with other parts of their lives, which blurs the line between career counseling and personal counseling, and calls for a broader definition of career development. Hansen (1997) has proposed the term "integrative life planning" to expand career development beyond trait factor theories and matching people with jobs, to include other work and life roles. This definition of career development is linked closer to the purpose and objectives of HRD with its holistic focus and the greater emphasis on work and organizations. New developments in theory building and practice in this area should be encouraged.

Systems Theory: The Missing Link Between Career Development and HRD?

Like HRD, career development is an applied field with a multi-disciplinary theory base (Boudreaux, 2001). In previous efforts to link career development and HRD, the focus was on identifying these theoretical frameworks in career development that can inform HRD theory and practice; these include: trait-factor theory, social learning theory, adult development theory, and behavioral theory (Boudreaux, 2001; Upton, Egan & Lynham, 2003). Although HRD scholars need to be informed by these theories, organizational change models and systems thinking might provide a stronger basis for arguing why career development lies at the heart of HRD (Russel, 1991, Patton & McMahan, 1998).

A systems perspective might provide a new insight in the relationship between career development and HRD. Elements of systems thinking, such as interconnectedness of parts, relatedness, and a notion that the whole is more than the sum of its parts were already present in some career development theories, such as Hansen's (1997) model of integrative life planning. Nevertheless, Patton and McMahan (1998) are the first who proposed a meta-theoretical framework using systems theory for the integration of different career theories and the development of a relationship between theory and practice with a focus on the individual. They portrayed the field of career development as a self-organizing, open system that constantly changes from within, but is also changed by the ongoing interaction with other systems.

Patton and McMahon's (1998) systems theory framework of career development focuses on the individual as a learning system, and includes elements such as: skill, world-of-work knowledge, workplace, employment market and education institutions – elements that are very much related to HRD. Although no specific comparison between HRD and career development theories is made in this framework, I would recommend this as an area for future research.

As Patton and McMahon (1998) stated “A systems theory perspective recognizes the contribution to career development theory and practice of other disciplines” (p. 167). This can also be applied in a HRD setting, where a systems career development approach can aid to our understanding of the development of a meaningful integration of systems and organizational level development with individual development in the workplace” (Upton, Egan & Lynham, 2003, p. 728)

Directions for Future Research

The purpose of this paper was to argue that career development should be a foundation for the field of HRD. In order to strengthen the ties between the fields and to create a body of literature with a focus on the commonalities between the fields, much future research is needed. In summary, future research should focus on six main areas: (1) the consequences of the changing nature of work and careers on career development, (2) effectiveness of different career development interventions, (3) a holistic approach towards career development, (4) the role of learning in the development of careers, (5) societal and national issues, and (6) systems thinking.

Consequences of the Changing Nature of Work and Careers

This includes examining external or environmental factors associated with learning, development and performance such as the impact of technology and cross-cultural implications of career development (ACES, 2000; Boudreaux, 2001; Sullivan, 1999). In addition, emerging concepts like employability, free agent workers and the effects of boundaryless careers need further attention (Boudreaux, 2001; Sullivan, 1999; Upton, Egan & Lynham, 2003).

Effectiveness

This includes examining how different employment relationships affect individual and organizational outcomes (Sullivan, 1999; Upton, Egan & Lynham, 2003). Another important research area is to examine the effectiveness of organizational programs and newer learning methods that focus on developing the skills needed for success in non-traditional career paths (Sullivan, 1999). Research on the proposed link between career development interventions and individual and organizational performance improvement needs more attention. As Boudreaux (2001) argued, future career development research and practice must be linked more closely to performance outcomes.

Holistic Approach

Future research must take a more holistic approach to career development, acknowledge its contextual nature, and the interplay between work and life issues (Hansen, 1997). Research should include the relationship between different career development interventions and activities with all corresponding facets of personal identity (Hall, 1996). This holistic approach to career development should also include examining systems dimensions of learning and performance and looking for connections between employee preferences and competencies, and HRD practices (Upton, Egan & Lynham, 2003).

Learning Theory

Future research should focus on the role of learning theory in career development. Informal learning and specific individual development practices with a focus on learning will be a very important part of future career development practice (McCauley & Hezlett, 2001; Power, Hubschman, & Doran, 2001; Upton, Egan & Lynham, 2003; Van der Sluis & Poell (2003). Learning theory shows promise to tighten the interrelationships between career development and HRD, which needs to lead to an examination of interchanges between individual career development interests and organizational needs (Upton, Egan & Lynham, 2003).

Societal and National Issues

The increasingly widening gap between the “haves” and “have nots” should be of great concern in future career development and HRD research. With expanding definitions of both HRD and career development (Herr, 2001; McLean & McLean, 2001) come greater responsibilities as well. Although this is a big aspiration, career development and HRD should focus on the whole of humanity and not forget about the people with the least skills, who often need attention the most to develop their expertise (ACES, 2000; Leana, 2002; McDonald, Hite & Gilbreath, 2002).

Systems Thinking

The focus on systems in both career development and HRD shows potential for bringing the two fields closer together. Career development can be seen as a sub-system of HRD. The nature of systems is that the sub systems

influence each other. More research is needed on how HRD influences career development and the other way around. Patton and McMahon's (1998) systems framework for career development provides a good starting point to investigate this relationship further.

Conclusion

Due to macro economic, technological and demographical changes, career development has changed dramatically over the past years. This raised the question: should career development still be considered a component of HRD, or is there a new paradigm we should be looking at? Although, career development as a field is still mostly focused on career choice, developmental stages and career counseling (ACES, 2000; Hansen, 1997; Herr, 2001; McDonald, Hite & Gilbreath, 2002) a holistic approach to career development has been proposed that shows a closer relationship with the outcomes and objectives of HRD (Hansen, 1997). Further investigation into systems theory as the missing link between both fields promises to be fruitful. Patton and McMahon's (1998) systems framework provides a good starting point to elaborate on the holistic approach as proposed by Hansen (1997) and can provide a better insight in the nature of the relationship between career development and HRD.

A major change in the nature of career development has been the shift in responsibility from the organization to the individuals. Employees are expected to become free agents, self-directed learners, who take charge of their own career (Feldman, 2002; Leana, 2002; Sullivan, 1999; Swanson & Holton, Upton, Egan & Lynham, 2003). Research shows, however, that career development depends "both on the work environment in terms of learning opportunities and on individual characteristics in terms of learning behavior" (Van der Sluis & Poell, 2003, p. 174). As a result, the future role for HRD and career development professionals should be to help organizations create meaningful learning opportunities and encourage learning behavior at all levels of the organization, for all employees, not just high potentials (McLean, 2002). Career development and HRD practitioners can assist employees with goal setting and developing a career vision, resulting in whole-person learning for the employee and improved performance on the individual, systems, and organizational level (Conlon, 2003; Hansen, 1997).

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