Perceived Effectiveness and Application of Organizational Career Development Practices

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This paper discusses the results of a study involving data gathered from a heterogeneous sample of organizations within a four-states region of the Midwestern United States. The main objective of this research was to determine the frequency and prevalence of career development practices and their perceived effectiveness among human resource executives. The results of the study show the demographics, status, and selected practices of the organizational career development systems utilized by the respondents.

Keywords: Career Development Practices, Career Development, Career Development Programs

The days of the organization creating a parent-like environment to loyal employees are quickly moving into the pages of history. New strategies requiring various approaches are replacing the contented attitudes and practices to which we had grown so accustomed (Gutteridge & Otte, 1983). The business world is experiencing a metamorphosis precipitated by revolutionary changes in technology, diverse consumer demands, globalization of our economy, corporate downsizing, rightsizing, restructuring, and increased competition. Coincidentally, "psychologists, sociologists, educators, economists, and management scholars are trying to understand how a person selects, works within, and makes decisions to change the focus of his or her working life" (DeSimone, Harris, & Werner, 2002, p.452). Furthermore, practitioners of human resource development are experiencing multiple challenges in the pursuit of perfecting the working person's career. The practitioner's role in organizational career development is now viewed as a "strategic process in which maximizing an individual's career potential is a way of enhancing the success of the organization as a whole" (Sherman, Bohlander, & Snell, 1998, p.258). Because career development provides orientation to human resource development practices, it is vital that we gain an understanding of its importance and find ways to enhance the growth of the careers of every employee in the workforce. "A career consists of a sequence of work-related positions occupied by a person for the course of a lifetime. Traditionally, careers were judged in terms of advancement and promotion upward in the organizational hierarchy. Today, they are defined in more holistic ways to include a person's attitude and experiences" (Cummings & Worley, 2001, p. 413).

The quest for knowledge to facilitate the development of careers has never been greater than it is in today's business world. Considered one of three major functions within the discipline of human resource development, career development may be defined as a "an ongoing process by which individuals progress through a series of stages, each of which is characterized by a relatively unique set of issues, themes, and tasks" (Greenhaus, 1987, p. 9). Career development may be viewed as a two-part process: career planning and career management. Career planning involves an individual's actions to determine skills, knowledge, abilities, values, and sometimes personality traits necessary, not only for the selection of a career, but to ensure and facilitate success once the career is chosen. Career planning may be a solitary action or a counselor may assist the individual in a more formalized set of procedures. Career management, on the other hand, involves the deliberate application of steps necessary to achieve the career plan, and maintain the career, and is usually administered in conjunction with the needs of the individual and the needs and support of the organization (DeSimone, et al., 2001).

The journey towards retirement usually entails three to five career changes in one's passage into retirement. During that period adults may progress through traditional or modified approaches of career development (Greenhaus, Callanan, & Godshalk, 2000). Leibowitz, Farren, & Kaye, (1986) stated, "The effectiveness of a career development system lies in its consideration of the interaction, interdependence, and integration of all the elements within an organization" (p. 5). For a career development system to be effective, it must "have clearly defined responsibilities to the employees, the managers, and the organization; offer them a variety of development options; and form the link between current performance and future development, which includes the notion of the best "fit" or "match""(Leibowitz, et al., 1986, p. 5). The results of this study offer important insights into developmental career practices in this region of the Midwestern United States. Conclusions are drawn from this research that inspire human resource development practitioners to link developmental planning with organizational strategies and enhance the growth of individuals and organizations alike.

Problem Statement and Purpose

Career development practices and activities selected and utilized by human resource development practitioners vary from a minor few to multiple possibilities when addressing the growth of employees' careers and ultimately the growth of the organization. A principal goal of this study was to gain a greater knowledge of the *preference and frequency of use* of career developmental tools and their application by various organizations within a four-states area of the Midwestern U.S. Due to the limited knowledge available regarding the prevalence and use of career development tools and practices in the aforementioned geographical area, the study sought to answer the following research questions: 1). What were the prevalent career development practices utilized by organizations studied? 2). Which practices did the HR managers in the study perceive as effective or ineffective? 3). Which career development categories, and accompanying practices were more frequently used? 4). What were the HR managers' perceptions regarding the effectiveness of the categories and the accompanying practices?

Theoretical Implications in Career Development

As early as 1985, researchers have indicated the youthful existence of career development theory and research within the field of social sciences. Some have emphasized positive developments, claiming unity within the ranks in specific areas, while others voiced significant concern regarding the lack of cohesiveness in the many theoretical applications in the practice of organizational career development. As noted, "The field is fractionated, partly because it falls between the various academic disciplines that inform it" (Hall, 1986, p. 3). Theorists in the sociological and anthropological areas primarily focus on the organization's role in career development (Glaser, 1968; Perrucci & Gerstl, 1969; Van Maanen, 1973). In other areas, such as occupational psychology, the direction of career development has been related to assessing personality traits, values, skills, and interests of the individual. Basically, this theoretical position asserts that an accurate inventory of the aforementioned variables and subsequent use of this information to match the individual to a compatible occupation is a viable approach to successful career development (Osipow, 1983; Holland, 1973; Super, 1980).

Schein (1978) pointed out the biases that organizational psychologists exhibit towards the development of personnel in lower levels within organizations, as compared to managerial psychologists who favor career development practices targeted for managerial resources. He expressed doubts about the latter developmental theory due to his belief that organizations would soon be focusing needs on individuals with technical and functional expertise (Hall, 1986). Offering another view, Leibowitz, et al., (1986) stated, "The most successful career development programs are most often based on one or more theories grounded in those disciplines" (p. 71). Additionally, Leibowitz, et al., (1986) claim, "No one theory will work for all settings, for all purposes, or for all professions. They range on a continuum from individually based perspectives to organization conceptualizations. They represent many different viewpoints" (p. 70). Familiarities of theory, knowledge of the target group, theory acceptance within the organization, and utility or usefulness during the proposed intervention, are considerations a practitioner may want to adhere to in career development practices. Using theories as guides and adapting several theoretical approaches during career development serves as an advantage to the practitioner (Leibowitz, 1986). Several scholars believe the theoretical support for formal career development continues to be lacking or weak (Arthur, Hall & Lawrence, 1989; Gunz & Jalland, 1996). While Baruch (1999) states, "Much of the literature on career development has focused on the individual view whereas there is an acute lack of theoretical formulation of organizational practices" (p. 432). Fundamentally, most practitioners, and some theorists and scholars are continuing to use a multiple-theory approach, based primarily on the individual view of organizational career development.

In the early 1990s, the American Society for Training and Development (ASTD) undertook to sponsor a proposal to study career developmental tools in large organizations in the United States, Australia, Singapore, and throughout various European countries. The ASTD-sponsored study solicited responses from mostly large organizations due to the greater occurrence of career development systems within that population. The resulting information provided valuable knowledge on the types, effectiveness, and frequent uses of specific career development practices (Gutteridge, Leibowitz, Shore, 1993).

The ASTD fully explains the role of career development programs in organizations. The study identified the following career development practices as the most frequently used: *"Organizational Potential Assessment Processes; Internal Labor-Market Information Exchanges; Employee Self-Assessment Tools; Individual Counseling or Career Discussions; Job-Matching Systems; or Development Programs"* (Gutteridge, et al., 1993, p. 4). In the case of the organizations studied in this study, the main objective was to establish the kind of career practices used and how effective these practices were as perceived by the HR executives studied.

Method

Target Population

The target population for the study consisted of HR executives based in Midwestern United States. Organizations within this geographical area enjoy significantly greater successes than those of some other areas of the United States. In addition, moderate climatic conditions, and surpluses in labor indicate continued growth and development of commerce within this region. The participating organizations surveyed in this study were located in small to midsize communities with populations ranging from 4500 to 250,000 inhabitants. Annual sales or budgets of these organizations ranged from under $25 million to $1 billion or over, with employees numbering greater than 400 to over 25,000. The study was extended to include smaller organizations, which are common within the targeted four-states area. Approximately 65% of these diversified organizations employ 500 to 4,999 persons. Included were organizations from retail/wholesale trade, energy (public utilities, petroleum, chemicals), education, services, diversified/conglomerate and high tech organizations. The initial census of the human resource executives who met the criteria above resulted in 29 HR executives. The questionnaires were administered to the 29 executives however, 27 (93%) HR executives completed the questionnaires. Of the 27, one questionnaire was incomplete and could not be used. The remaining 2 (7%) did not complete the questionnaires.

Sample Size and Sampling Techniques

To ensure an appropriately diverse population from which to survey, the names of twenty-nine organizations typically characteristic of the aforementioned geographical region were selected and complied in a contrived manner. Human resource executives were selected after examining organizations listed in the online database *Reference USA* at Pittsburg State University Library, and determining the location, size, type, number of employees, and approximate annual sales or budgets. The majority (69%) of the sample represented industrial/consumer manufacturing and health care organizations. This sample indicates a wide, but acceptable range of small, mid-size, and large organizations that were representative of the target area studied in this research.

Instrumentation

A research questionnaire entitled "Questionnaire for Human Resource Executives on Career Development Practices" was designed based on a review of the literature and a previous study conducted by ASTD. The survey questionnaire included information related to demographics, frequencies and preferences of career development categories, and practices utilized. The instrument also included Likert type items that measured the perceived effectiveness of the various career development practices of the organizations in the study. The content and face validity of the instrument was established by giving it to research experts in the field of human resource development and research methodology at Pittsburg State University for examination. Their comments were incorporated and helped in preparing the final instrument.

Data Collection Procedures

As opposed to utilizing a direct-mailing approach to gathering data, and with the goal of ensuring a high response rate, data collection involved traveling to each location, tendering questionnaires to human resource executives, and providing specific definitions for any unfamiliar terminology within the questionnaire. An aim of this research was to ensure uniform interpretation of the various human resource development practices cited within the questionnaire, and to ultimately gather accurate data from which to analyze and draw conclusions. Twenty-nine human resource executives were asked to complete surveys, with twenty-six responding immediately or returning the survey by mail after conferring with colleagues. While one respondent completed the instrument and handed it to the researcher.

Results

Data in Table 1 show that most (57.7%) of the organizations involved in this study are manufacturing and health care, while annual budgets or sales ranged from under $25 million to over $1 billion. Eight or 30.8% of the respondents reported their organization's budgets or sales in the $100 million to $499 million range, with 19.2% of the participants reporting an annual budget or sales of $1 billion or over. Four (15.4%) respondents reported less than 500 employees, while eleven (42.3%) of the respondents reported 500 to 900 employees. Additionally, 23.1% of the organizations reported 5,000 to 9,999 employees, and four respondents (15.4%) reported 10,000 to 49,999 employees.

Table 1. *Organizational Demographics*

Type of Organization	Frequency	Percent
Manufacturing (consumer)	3	11.5
Manufacturing (industrial)	9	34.6
Retail/Wholesale trade	1	3.8
Energy (public utilities, petroleum, chemicals)	2	7.7
Education/nonprofit	1	3.8
Services (Bus. food &hosp., rec., repairs)	2	7.7
Medical/health	6	23.1
Diversified/conglomerate	1	3.8
High Tech	1	3.8
Total	26	100.0

Organization's Annual Budget or Sales

	Frequency	Percent
Under $25 million	3	11.5
$25 million to $49 million	1	3.8
$50 million to $99 million	2	7.7
$100 million to $499 million	8	30.8
$500 million to $999 million	1	3.8
$1 billion or over	5	19.2
Total	20	76.9
Missing data	6	23.1
Total	26	100.0

Number of employees in entire organization

	Frequency	Percent
Fewer than 500	4	15.4
500 to 999	11	42.3
1,000 to 4,999	6	23.1
5,000 to 9,999	1	3.8
10,000 to 24, 999	2	7.7
25,000 to 49,999	2	7.7
Total	26	100.0

The study also revealed that a majority of the respondents (96.2%) indicated an existing career development system. Data in Table 2 show career development programs provided by the organizations studied. As data in Table 2 show, twenty-one respondents (80.2%) believed the employee was primarily responsible for career development. Table 2 also shows three of the most successful career development practices employed by the executives in the study. *In-House Training* and *Development* programs were rated as being effective or very effective by 76.9% of the respondents. Twenty-five (96.2%) of the *respondents* utilized *Tuition Reimbursements*. Eleven (42.3%) reported that *Tuition Reimbursements* was a very effective career development practice in their organizations. Another 26 (100%) of the respondents, utilized employee *Orientation Programs,* with 22 (84.6%) declaring its use as effective to very effective. *Employee self-assessment*: *Computer Software* had only 9 (34.6%) of the respondents.

Table 2. *Status and Selected Practices of Organizational Career Development Practitioners*

Variable	Frequency	Percent
Employee responsibility for career development		
0	5	19.2
10	1	3.8
33	5	19.2
40	3	11.5
50	7	26.9
70	2	7.7
90	3	11.5
Total	26	100.0
In-house training and development programs		
Moderately effective	4	15.4
Effective	16	61.5
Very effective	4	15.4
Total	24	92.3
Missing data	2	7.7
Total	26	100.0
Tuition reimbursements		
Occasionally effective	1	3.8
Moderately effective	5	19.2
Effective	8	30.8
Very effective	11	42.3
Total	25	96.2
Missing data	1	3.8
Total	26	100.0
Employee orientation programs		
Occasionally effective	1	3.8
Moderately effective	3	11.5
Effective	11	42.3
Very effective	11	42.3
Total	26	100.0
Employee self-assessment: Computer software		
Moderately effective	5	19.2
Effective	3	11.5
Very effective	1	3.8
Total	9	34.6
Missing data	17	65.4
Total	26	100.0

Additional results include information from the six categories of career development practices researched in this study. The categories of *Self-Assessment Tools* and *Internal Labor-Market Information Exchanges* showed minimal to moderate use by the respondents. Practices offered in these categories included, but were not limited to some of the following: Career Workbooks, Computer Software, and Career Resource Centers. Smaller organizations tended to use these practices less frequently.

In the category of *Individual Counseling Or Career Discussions*, the practices of Supervisory or Line Manager Discussions and Personnel Staff Discussions, as career development practices, were popular with more than 75% of the respondents declaring its use. Both practices were given ratings of effectiveness exceeding 53%. The findings in the category of *Job-Matching Systems* lead these researchers to conclude that this is one of the two most popular and successful career development categories studied in this research. Significant is the frequent use of four practices, Job Posting, Skills Inventories or Skills Audit, Replacement or Succession Planning, and Internal Placement System, in which at least 15 (50%) of the respondents reported their use. The use of Job Posting as a career development practice indicates it is the most popular with 24 or 92.3% of the respondents indicating its usage, and 22 or 84.7% declaring it to be effective to very effective.

In the category of *Development Programs*, several practices were noted as being frequently used and perceived as effective to very effective. A summary of this final category shows nine distinct practices (including those previously mentioned in Table 2.). Following are selected highlights from this category: Nineteen or 73.1% of the respondents utilized the practices Job Enrichment and Job Rotation. External Seminars or Workshops, followed closely with 63% of the respondents rating this practice as effective to very effective. Also noteworthy in this category, is Mentoring Systems, where sixteen or 61.5% of the respondents confirmed its use, and thirteen rate its use as effective to very effective.

Discussion

This research was driven by the need to establish career development processes used to promote and manage strategic processes among its employees for the purposes of enhancing career and organizational development. The study examined the career development processes used by the respondents. A majority of the human resource managers studied reported that the tuition reimbursement programs were very effective in promoting career development of the employees. This was followed by provision of In-house training and development programs. Subsequent to appropriate needs assessment and analysis, organizations should link developmental planning and shared vision in a collaborative effort to ensure the maximum benefit of all employees in an organization. For example, when using the practice of *Tuition Reimbursement*, outcomes should be reviewed to determine if this practice is applied developmentally to the shifting needs of the organization and those of the employees.

Specific training should be made available to employees who may serve as coaches in career development. Emphasis should be placed on the importance of their coaching behaviors, the influence they have over the development of others, and on-the-job approaches to practices that ultimately affect organizational growth. Stressing job enrichment, and a "language" of career development with appropriate dialogue, and the identification of attractive competencies, will also serve to boost career development. Important also is highlighting diverse career development approaches, seeking feedback via needs assessments while stressing quality and employee-induced responsibility for their achievement in this area.

Additionally, organizations should determine ways to measure and evaluate in a holistic manner the impact of career development to both the employees and the organizations themselves. Human resource executives should also publicize career development practices and commend the successes of those who excel at these practices. Also, there is a need to continuously monitor the global career development practices picture. The study of the career development practices of successful local organizations is also important. While doing this, practitioners should be aware of the unlimited possibilities abroad (Gutteridge, et al., 1993; Leibman, Bruer, & Maki, 1996).

Conclusions

In conclusion, based on the results of this study, the data reveals that respondents used practices from two categories, 1) *Development Programs,* 2) *Job-Matching Systems,* more than others. The category of *Development Programs* was practiced more often than the other previously mentioned five categories and the ratings of effective-to-very effective were also reported more frequently than within other categories. Human resource executives in the study perceived four practices, job enrichment or job design, job rotation, tuition reimbursement, and employee orientation as more effective than others. Significant practices in the second-most popular category of *Job-Matching Systems* were job posting, skills inventories or skills audit and replacement or succession planning. These practices

were also rated as effective to very effective. In addition, the results of this study allow interested stakeholders and practitioners of human resource development to make meaningful generalizations about career development practices in similar populations.

Recommendations for Further Research

Based on the results of this study, recommendations for additional research would be to determine what frameworks or models are being utilized in the category of *Developmental Programs* (specifically in the noted successful practices) to achieve the higher frequency, prevalence, and effectiveness ratings reported by the respondents. Additionally, in the category of *Self-Assessment Tools*, which showed minimal to moderate use by the respondents, it is recommended that further research be conducted to assess the viability of *Computer Software* as a developmental practice, and whether or not this practice is more valuable than revealed by this study. Data should be gathered that could determine its strength or weakness as a practice and its generalizability to other populations.

It is also recommended that data be gathered in the category of *Individual Counseling or Career Discussions* on the procedures used in the practice of *Supervisor or Line Managers* as an effective career development tool. Due to the close interaction of the employee and supervisor, this practice could be developed and expanded to further assist employees in their career development. Also, the positive response of the practice of *Employee Orientation Programs*, under the category of *Developmental Programs*, should be researched further to determine the most effective means for deployment as an aid to career and developmental growth. Finally, an organization's success is the end result of the developed or underdeveloped people it employs. Career development practices should be emphasized by unreservedly offering any information to employees that encourages professional and personal growth. Career development programs must go beyond the scope of the job itself and prepare workforces to be competent and adaptable as the new economy and people experience the effects of change (French, 1998). Therefore, it is strongly recommended that organizations continue to monitor and review current literature on career development tools and practices, and tailor programs in a manner that will advance employees in an accelerated and successful process through the inevitable changes of the future (Leibman, et al., 1996).

Limitations

A potential limitation of this study concerns the generalizability of the findings given that the study involved a contrived sample of the stated population. Though every effort was made to select a heterogeneous sample characteristic of the organizations from the four-states area, one could argue that the outcome may have changed with different participants. Due to the study's travel-requirement design, time and finances were also a limiting factor in sampling a larger number of organizations and ultimately reinforcing the generalizability of the study.

Implications for Human Resource Development

Implications for practitioners of human resource development concerning the use of organizational career development practices to enhance employee career development can be derived from the reported study. Organizational leaders should encourage management to conduct needs assessments, analyze, design, implement, and evaluate career development programs in their established businesses. Based on the reported study, specific organizational career development practices were considerably more successful than others and may hold greater appeal to the employee in terms of overall effectiveness and utility. In larger organizations, with many employees, pilot programs may need to be tested prior to costly and extensive engagement or reforms of career development activities. The current trends of employee empowerment, individual responsibility for career development, and alignment of business strategies with new competency requirements, lend itself to organizational career development. In addition, current emphasis on total quality management, technological changes, organizational restructuring, and the knowledge that career development may be achieved through job enrichment, require practitioners to pay closer attention to this method of organizational growth and development. The employee will also benefit by developing transferable competencies that ensure continued employment regardless of changes within their organizations or the global marketplace. However, on the negative side, employees may resist programs they deem unnecessary. When job security is a primary issue, loyalty to the organization may decline, while fear and cynicism may escalate (Gutteridge, et al., 1993).

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