Reclaiming Relevance: HRD and Career Development

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This paper addresses HRD's current absence from career development discourse and practice. The authors suggest a framework for reintegrating career development into the HRD function and offer recommendations for future action.

Keywords: Career Development, Foundations of HRD, Careers

While career development technically remains one of the established focal points of human resource development efforts (DeSimone, Werner & Harris, 2002), it seemingly has been overshadowed of late by research and discourse addressing other aspects of HRD. This is evident in the few papers devoted to career development in recent AHRD conferences (van Dijk, 2004). Some authors suggest that career development has been neglected within the field and argue that it should have more of a prominent role in both HRD scholarship and practice (Boudreaux, 2001; Powell, Hubschman, & Doran, 2001; van Dijk, 2004). The purpose of this paper is to suggest a framework of how HRD can promote and enhance the career development of individuals within organizations.

Theoretical Background

Current career development definitions vary in focus from the individual to the organization. Some see the concept as having a decidedly individual bent, "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, Callanan & Godshalk as cited in DeSimone, et al., 2002, p. 458). Van der Sluis and Poell (2003) suggest an influence of an outside source, describing it as "a process of professional growth brought about by work-related learning" (162), where the process apparently could be individually or organizationally driven. Gilley, Eggland, and Gilley (2002) suggest a collaborative effort, stating, "career development is a process requiring individuals and organizations to create a partnership that enhances employees' knowledge, skills, competencies, and attitudes required for their current and future job assignments" (94). They go on to emphasize the dual nature of the process noting that it is "a quintessential development activity" because enhanced individual performance contributes to the success of the organization.

These descriptors illustrate the evolutionary nature of career development. The traditional view was grounded in the mindset of making a career within an organization and of predictable, stable jobs. Career planning and management typically meant plotting a course within the organizational system that would yield promotions or increases in responsibility as expertise grew, and following that course. The mechanisms to accomplish career goals were often regularly scheduled training programs, job rotation, and perhaps some form of informal mentoring. This perspective was reinforced by popular career development models referencing life stages or phases that followed a linear path throughout the life cycle (DeSimone et al., 2002). Then things changed. As companies downsized, rightsized, and reconfigured, employees that once had pinned their career plans on advancement within a particular organization began to realize the future of their careers depended on their own initiative, and career planning took on a new dimension. During the mid 1990's a new career lexicon appeared, redefining well-used terms like "career" and "employment" to encompass a broad-based view. So "career" became not just a way to define "hierarchical progression" (p. 29) but a reference to all work experiences, and "employment" expanded to include not just one's place and type of occupation but also a person's employability over time (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996). At the same time, new words entered the vocabulary of career development. Hall's (1996) "protean career" captured the individual nature of career progress, driven by the person and evolutionary in nature; rather than fostered by and bound to an organization. Similarly, the "boundaryless career" described work experiences that spanned organizational systems, had credibility outside of one's present employment situation, utilized broad-based networks, and essentially followed the path set by the individual, rather than prescribed by the parameters of an employer (Arthur, 1994).

Despite these pervasive changes, research upholds the importance of career development to affirm and guide individuals through career transitions, to enhance organizational loyalty, motivation, and productivity, and to contribute to the larger structure of economic stability (Boudreaux, 2001; Herr, 2001). Individuals and organizations mutually benefit from the career development process, reinforcing its relevance as a human resource development function (Van Dijk ,2004).

However, as the focus of career development transitioned from being primarily organizationally based to being individually driven, the traditional implied contract upon which it was based (i.e. preparation for future service to the organization, advancement as reward for enhanced skills) crumbled. At the same time, career development appears to have lost emphasis in HRD research and practice. It is as if once the old roles no longer held, there was confusion about what to do next. A few researchers have acknowledged this transition point by noting some general direction for HRD to resume responsibility for career development. Conlon (2004) describes the paternalistic nature of the traditional employer-employee relationship and identifies the current situation as a partnership, involving employer-based "opportunities and tools" (p. 780) for employee development and individually driven career management that uses the opportunities available; concluding that HRD needs to reassert its role in career development to maximize the benefits for both individuals and organizations. Short and Opengart (2001) address the importance of HRD changing its traditional career development priorities to address the interests of free agents, employees focused on their own employability rather than on stability within any single organization. Powell et al. (2001) reinforce the importance of HRD re-framing its connection with career development by embracing informal learning. Doyle (2000) restates the interdependence of employers and employees in the career development process, noting that individual careers are influenced by organizational structures and that employer success depends in part to linking organizational goals with individual aspirations. He notes the changing psychological contract between employee and employer has become more complicated as both groups have declared their independence from one another for the long term, yet find themselves linked for the short term.

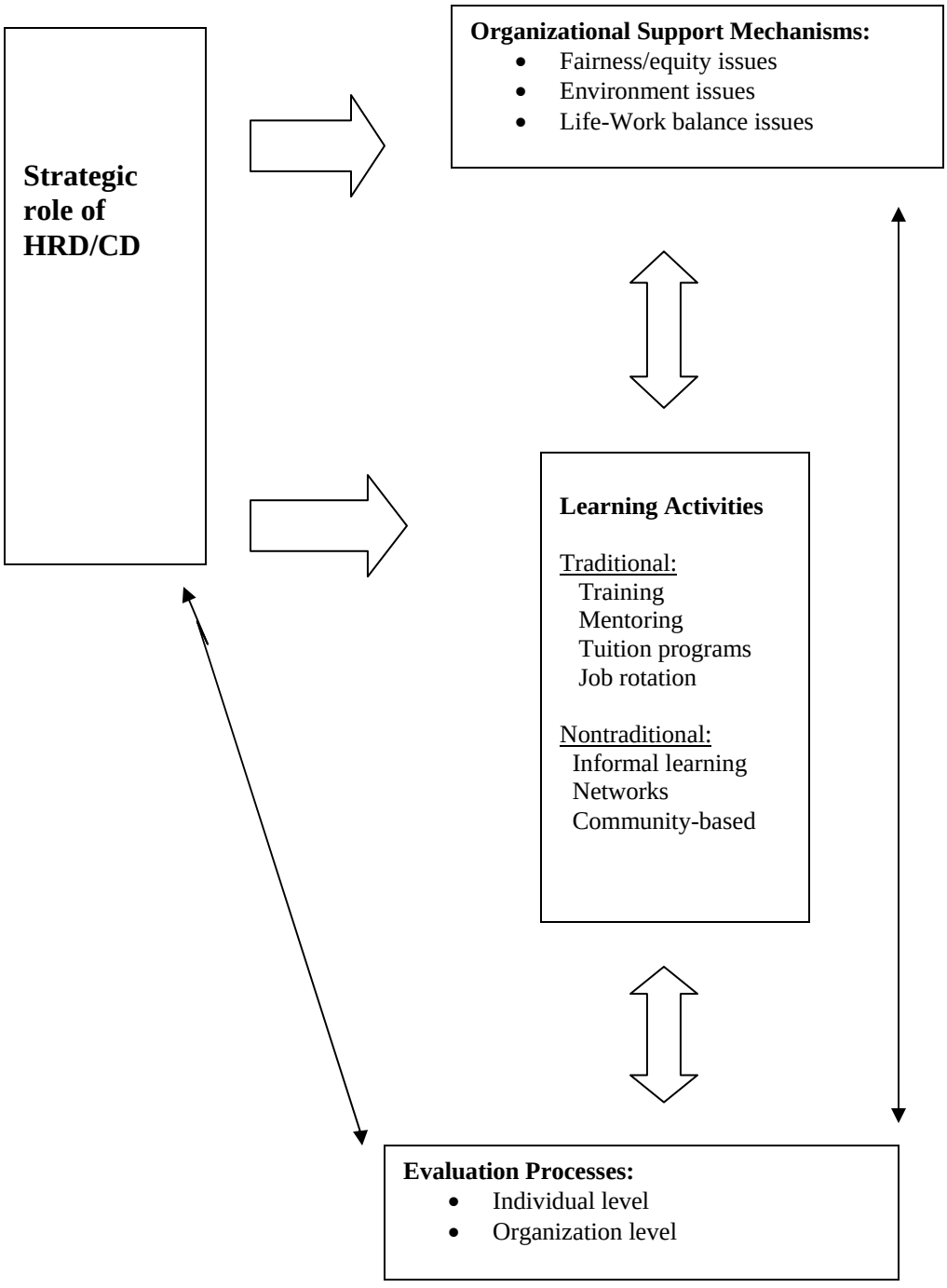
The overriding message appears to be that HRD needs to both reclaim and reinvent its involvement in career development. Doyle (2000) sums up the prevailing thought by suggesting that human resources can best re-enter the field by relinquishing the outdated focus on controlling what career development is and how it is provided and adopting a broader perspective. This means venturing into uncertain territory, becoming more flexible while maintaining a balance between the needs of the organization and those of the individual employee. This paper takes those general recommendations a step further by suggesting a framework for how HRD can respond to both constituencies, employees and employers, through the career development process (see figure 1).

Career Development: Definitions and Assumptions

We define career development as a collaborative process by which individual and organizational goals and priorities are met. This definition recognizes that career development is ongoing, that it involves reciprocal interaction between employee and employer, and that attainment and/or enhancement of individual capabilities are not restricted to a particular job, career path, or organization. This definition and the framework that follows are predicated on a few essential assumptions.

1. Career relevant learning can be both formal and informal and may take place within and outside of the organization.
2. Career development should not be restricted to a select few or to those at particular levels within the system.
3. Individual life and work priorities influence choices about careers and development opportunities.
4. The value of career development to the strategic success of organizations depends on how well the system supports the development process.
5. HRD remains integral to the career development process.
6. HRD must stay attuned to the strategic plans of the organization while remaining cognizant of the free agent nature of the employer-employee relationship.

Figure 1. An HRD Framework for Career Development



HRD Framework for Career Development

Strategic Role of HRD/CD

Most HRD practitioners and scholars would argue that HRD needs to be represented in determining the strategic direction of organizations. Fewer would agree that HRD typically is represented at the strategic planning table. However HRD's presence is critical in determining the company's role and responsibility regarding employees' careers. The overarching question is: What should the organization's philosophy be regarding career development and how, given today's environment, should this be enacted?

Doyle (2000) suggests that a strategy "based on formalized career structures and systems is unlikely to cope with the diversity and 'messiness' that is likely to characterize career management in the future (Bolton & Gold, 1994; Jackson et al., 1996)" (p. 239). HRD practitioners are well positioned to shape a system that is less paternalistic and controlling and that focuses more on how the organization can foster self-development in employees.

Organizational Support Mechanisms

According to Doyle (2000), HR's career development efforts should focus on "contextual factors and influences that shape career" (p. 240). HRD can make a difference in individuals' careers by attending to important organizational support mechanisms such as fairness and equity issues, environmental issues, and life-work balance issues.

Fairness/equity issues. Most organizations have concentrated their career development efforts on their upper-echelon employees, primarily those individuals in professional/technical and managerial positions (Leibowitz, Feldman, & Mosley, 1992; McDonald, Hite, & Gilbreath, 2002). Yet, there is some evidence that non-exempt, hourly employees do think about their careers and desire more developmental opportunities (McDonald, Hite, & Gilbreath, 2002). Both Conlon (2004) and van Dijk (2004) suggest HRD take a stronger stance regarding workplace justice and career development opportunities for employees at all levels in organizations.

As an advocate for a career development strategy that is inclusive rather than exclusive, HRD practitioners should continually ask: Do all employees have access to development opportunities? Are all employees made aware of developmental opportunities? Are rewards for participating distributed in a fair and equitable manner? Wooten & Cobb (1999) write that fairness issues must always be considered when planning career development (CD):

> By its very nature, CD involves basic issues of fairness over the allocation of CD resources, the policies and procedures used to decide who receives them, and the interactions between those who provide and those who not only receive CD rewards but also experience its losses (p. 173).

Environment issues. Many factors within the work environment have the potential to influence employee career development. London (1983) provides a comprehensive list of potential situational variables that might influence career motivation. Included in his list are issues related to reward structures, organizational climate, leadership, and job design. For example, HRD should advocate for compensation structures that reward career development activities. McDonald, et al. (2002) report that some nonexempt employees are frustrated by the lack of tangible outcomes for participating in CD activities. Companies may need to rethink what rewards and recognition they can realistically provide. Cappelli (1999) suggests that the "employability concept" may be what organizations can offer to employees. He explains this concept in this way: ". . . we cannot offer you security with our company, but we can help you to secure skills that will help keep you employable, that will lead to some security in the labor market by helping you find other jobs" (pp. 29-30). For some, time off to pursue development opportunities may be enough of an incentive.

Empirical studies indicate that supervisory support has a strong impact on career development (Van der Sluis & Poell, 2003) and career motivation (London, 1993). Supervisory support might include such activities as coaching, advocacy, providing performance feedback, serving as a sounding board for career plans, and providing adequate time for development opportunities (London, 1993). Unfortunately, many line managers are ill equipped to help employees develop their careers (McDougall & Vaughan, 1996). While evidence suggests supervisors still need to be trained to assist in employees' career development and be rewarded for those efforts, HRD can support supervisors in other ways as well. HRD can help supervisors develop a greater awareness of the multiple ways they affect issues of fairness and equity. For example, supervisors often serve as a gateway to employees' access to development opportunities. In addition, HRD can help educate supervisors regarding work-life balance issues and how they can assist employees in dealing with these concerns.

Life-Work balance issues. Work-family (w-f) issues have been and continue to be addressed in the career development literature (e.g., Kossek & Ozeki, 1998; Martins, Eddleston, & Veiga, 2002; Powell & Maineiero,

1992). Research clearly indicates that work-family issues have a tremendous impact on individual satisfaction. For example, a meta-analysis of the research reveals a consistent "negative relationship between all types of w-f conflict and job and life satisfaction" (Kossek & Ozeki, 1998, p. 145). Martins, et al. (2002) note that work-family conflicts are significantly related to women's career satisfaction. Several studies suggest that work-family conflicts play a significant role in career choices, aspirations, and patterns – particularly in regards to women's careers (e.g., Eccles, 1994; Erwin & Stewart, 1997; Hite & McDonald, 2003).

Clearly work-family balance issues need to be on every organization's agenda, particularly when focusing on performance and career development. Polach (2003) indicates that work-life integration is an "organizational effectiveness issue" in which HRD can "play a key role" (p. 64). An obvious way in which HRD can play a role is in advocating for work-family benefits that meet the variety of needs likely to be found in any given organization. For example, HR practitioners should be cognizant of fairness perceptions regarding work-family benefits. Parker & Allen (2001) report that women perceive work/family benefits as more fair than males, and employees with younger children (e.g., living at home) view work/family benefits more positively since they might gain more from those benefits.

Perhaps more importantly, HRD practitioners can assist in building networks and structures within their organizations that can provide socio-emotional support for those experiencing work-family conflicts. Martins, et al. (2002) examine factors that moderate the relationship between work-family conflict and career satisfaction. Two of their findings have implications for HRD. First, they note that being in the minority gender of one's work group reduces the availability of a supportive network of co-workers. Secondly, they reveal that strong ties to one's community can lessen the impact of work-family conflict because of the strong socio-emotional support individuals often receive from these ties. HRD can address these points through nontraditional learning activities.

Learning Activities

Traditionally, HRD's contribution to employees' career development has been through formalized programs such as training, mentoring, tuition reimbursement programs, and career planning workshops. While these types of programs will continue to be important in developing some individuals' careers, the reality is that many organizations do not have the resources or the time to offer numerous formalized programs. We refer to these as "bounded" activities since access to and availability of these events is contingent on the organization's ability and willingness to offer them.

Increasingly, scholars are focusing on "boundary-spanning" activities like informal learning as an alternative means of career development (Conlon, 2004; van Dijk, 2004). As Powell, Hubschman, & Doran (2001) write: "Currently, with the organizational community facing reorganization, downsizing and the constant evolving of job descriptions and roles, formal learning, implemented usually through training classes and workshops is diminishing; informal learning has become the mindset" (p. 823). Powell et al. (2001) present a model to illustrate the role informal learning can take in "re-creating career development" (p. 825). How HRD can assist in facilitating this process is an integral part of their model.

Another potential boundary-spanning activity to support career development efforts is developing informal and/or formal networks for employees. Many professional and managerial personnel have networking opportunities both within and outside their work environments. Similar opportunities are rare for nonexempt employees. Yet there is some evidence that hourly employees desire and see strong benefits in networking (McDonald, et al., 2002). Networks can provide socio-emotional support as employees attempt to balance life-work issues (Martins, et al., 2002). Additionally, they can serve as a means of gaining important knowledge (Friedman, 1996). For example, Martins, et al. (2002) suggest that organizations might create "organization-wide networking groups" to provide social support for those individuals in the minority gender in their work groups, and organizations may want to encourage employees to develop stronger ties to their communities (p. 407). HRD can play a valuable role in advocating to upper management the benefits of networks, offering expertise/assistance in facilitating such groups, providing information on how to set them up, and monitoring their effectiveness.

Following Martins et al. (2002) observation, the third boundary-spanning activity we suggest is community involvement. In today's corporate environment, employees recognize the need to develop their careers beyond the walls of corporate America. Serving on community boards, volunteering in non-profit organizations, and assisting in community events can develop employees' skills as well as provide additional networking opportunities and socio-emotional support (Martins et al, 2002; McDonald, et al., 2002). The employees' organizations benefit as well from the skills, knowledge and confidence employees gain from participating in these activities. Again, HRD can take the lead in encouraging volunteerism, acting as a resource for employees wanting to become more involved in their community, and advocating for flexible work schedules so employees can engage in such activities.

These boundary-spanning activities may require fewer organizational resources than the more traditional bounded development initiatives. However, they have the potential to be very effective in meeting the needs of

employees in turbulent organizational environments for two major reasons. First, these activities may expand individuals' perspectives of what a career can involve. Activities such as networking and community involvement may broaden one's identity to more clearly understand the multiple facets of how work and life intersect. Secondly, these activities may help individuals develop new and different skill sets, increasing resiliency and employability. Together they respond to employee needs and interests in the age of the protean career.

Evaluation Processes

Evaluating career development efforts in this messy, turbulent environment may be a complex and difficult process. This framework suggests how evaluation processes can evolve and what HRD needs to consider that may or may not be included currently in evaluation efforts. Two levels of evaluation will be discussed, the individual and organization, recognizing that these levels are not mutually exclusive and may overlap considerably.

Individual level. Hall (2002) discusses four major criteria to explain career effectiveness: tangible signs of success (e.g., objective measures like salary, promotions), attitudes about one's career (e.g., subjective measures), adaptability, and identity (e.g., life integration). Hall (2002) suggests that the first two criteria have a more short-term focus, while "identity and adaptability have a long-term orientation" (p. 133). The long-term perspective is more relevant to the boundaryless career concept and reality of flatter organizations. However, adopting that focus will mean exploration of new ways to measure and track individual career success. For example, Van der Sluis & Poell (2003) recommend that employability and life satisfaction may be used as "indicators of career success" (p. 176). Devising methods to capture such intangible factors as adaptability, identity, employability, and life/career satisfaction in measurable formats will require HRD practitioners to be creative and practical.

Organization level. The strategic direction of career development within the organization will help determine the evaluation processes used to assess the impact of CD on the organizational system. HRD should lead the discussion regarding the organization's goals for career development since these drive the evaluation process. Traditionally, organizations have expected career development efforts to improve performance, increase retention, create a loyal and committed workforce, and support an effective succession plan (DeSimone, et al., 2002; Gilley, et al., 2002). While some of these indicators still may be used, other criteria to evaluate the effectiveness of CD need to be considered. For example, workforce flexibility and employees who innovate and initiate change may have an important impact on organizational effectiveness (Prince, 2003). Establishing new measurements, based on the realities of today's organizations, and determining the mechanisms to assess effectiveness should fall within HRD's responsibility. These assessments also need to continually examine the organizational support mechanisms discussed earlier. How do employees perceive CD opportunities in terms of fairness issues? Are work-family conflicts interfering with employees' ability to participate in career development opportunities? Do supervisors help or hinder career development efforts within the organization?

Implications and Future Directions

While the focus and function of career development has evolved over time from set training and education programs to encompass more broad-based learning, HRD still has an important role to play in the process. It is a new role that requires a wider range of skills from the HRD practitioner and a mindset open to innovation and change. It actually is a natural progression. Just as employers have turned to HRD to achieve strategic goals through organization development and performance improvement initiatives, a renewed effort towards career development can contribute to organizational effectiveness. Similarly, a redirected focus on the individual nature of career development returns HRD to its roots of focusing on the needs of employees. Additional efforts on the part of HRD practitioners and academics are needed to make this transition a successful one:

Practitioners

- Claim a place at the strategic planning table and make the case for the importance of career development that addresses the priorities of employees and employers
- Enhance their own skills in coaching and reflective learning to address career development needs
- Become advocates for equity in access to career development activities
- Seek out ways to evaluate career development contributions at both individual and organizational levels

Researchers

- Conduct more empirical studies on informal learning and other dynamic learning opportunities
- Explore processes for evaluating career development outcomes for organizations and individuals
- Expand the literature by focusing more research on career choices and development of non-managerial employees

HRD Faculty

- Include career development as an integral part of the curriculum
- Prepare students with skills and knowledge needed to provide person-focused career development
- Encourage graduate students to conduct research on career development topics

This paper has focused how HRD can renew its commitment to career development as one of its fundamental functions. Whether the absence of HRD in career development discourse and practice has been the result of uncertainty of what to do or the misassumption that there was nothing to be done, it is time that HRD reclaim its role in making career development viable again. The framework and recommendations provided urge a new perspective for practitioners, researchers, and HRD faculty in reclaiming the relevance of career development.

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