

ELEMENTS OF PLANNING STRATEGIES FOR HUMAN RESOURCE DEVELOPMENT

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Summary

The articles in this section provide an overview of HRD as a field, the context in which the field of HRD operates, and both theoretical and practical information related to HRD planning initiatives. Looking at the section as a whole, a number of themes

emerge across articles. The criticality of a strategic, systems approach to HRD planning is central to all of the articles. HRD professionals must recognize that they work within the larger organizational system and that the ultimate results of their initiatives must improve organizational performance and success, and must also be perceived as crucial to organizational success. HRD professionals are gradually making the transition from being training, development and education specialists to serving as performance consultants. Their focus is the ultimate improvement of individual and organizational performance, through informal and formal interventions, both spontaneous and deliberate. This spotlight on performance leads to another common theme of measures and accountability. The planning processes discussed in this section all contain some element of measurement and evaluation of results, at the individual, team, and organizational levels.

Another theme involves the global nature of today's world, and the need to place the organizational system within the even larger context of nations and the world. The goal of sustainable development challenges all HRD professionals to consider their impact on the wider society and the world as a whole. HRD is uniquely positioned to consider both people and productivity issues as one, interconnected whole rather than as separate concerns, and has the opportunity to provide strong leadership in the global human development arena.

Changing technology is also a recurring theme throughout this section. Electronic methodologies for facilitating learning continue to show strong increases in popularity and volume. Many of the organizational systems that were once handled manually are automated. Telecommunications advances have created a world of interconnections difficult to imagine only a few years ago. HRD plays an important role as a mediator between these technical systems and the individuals who work with them, as well as a force for the productive use of technology to attain strategic goals.

Turbulence and change also emerge as salient characteristics of the global environment. While recognizing the need for planning methodologies to direct and anchor HRD initiatives, we also need to maintain a measure of flexibility in a constantly changing environment. The paradoxical need for structure and flexibility challenges all HRD professionals and managers to continue to revisit their assumptions and their models and adapt these to the inevitable changes the future will bring. We have the opportunity to leverage the technological and global changes we face for the benefit of individuals, organizations, and society throughout the world, provided we have the foresight, courage and leadership capabilities required of us

1. Introduction to Planning Strategies for HRD

Planning is a primary function in the management of any organization or system. In simple terms, planning involves setting the direction for the system and determining how to guide the system in that direction. Planning activities can be highly complex or simple, and can involve an individual or an entire multinational organization. The act of planning usually takes place at every level and within every function of a system and is crucial to the survival and success of the system.

This section deals with the more specific application of planning in the realm of Human Resource Development. The authors deal with different yet complementary topics about HRD planning: the process of analyzing the work systems that HRD should address, the formulation of HRD objectives, the resources required to accomplish HRD goals, the types of activities associated with HRD, the levels at which HRD planning should occur, and the essential elements that make up strategic plans in HRD. As a part of their discussion, the authors also provide important insights into the history, philosophy, and values of HRD as a discipline, the complex, global context in which HRD operates, and some of the trends likely to emerge in HRD in the future.

1.1. A Consideration of the Purpose and Role of HRD

As part of the broader view of HRD, several of the authors define HRD and its purpose and role within a broader systems framework. Over the years numerous scholars have attempted to define HRD, resulting in a variety of conceptualizations of HRD. Some of the common themes suggested by other scholars appear here, such as the observation that HRD is an interdisciplinary field that involves research, theory, and practice involving the learning and development of individuals, groups, organizations and other systems. Certainly, HRD employs a variety of interventions or developmental activities to enhance human potential and productivity of individuals, groups, and organizations. HRD is more, however, than a collection of tools and techniques; it is a process.

Going beyond the traditional boundaries of HRD, the authors of this section expand the purpose of HRD to include the need to "contribute to sustainable development," and the role of HRD in both "competence and culture building" for the purpose of achieving the current and future goals of an organization. We are also reminded of HRD's role in ensuring that an organization develops a learning culture and a learning strategy to achieve its mission and goals. As an additional clarification, HRD is said to be strategic "if it is aligned with organizational goals, objectives, problems and developments." All of these points add to a richer understanding of the purpose and role of HRD, and highlight the common agreement on HRD's focus on learning for the betterment of individuals, organizations, and societies.

1.2. HRD's Role in a Global Context

The authors of this section note that HRD does not exist in isolation; rather it is part of a much broader context that must be considered in order to understand the complexity and variability of HRD across organizations. At the global level, HRD, with its ability to adopt both a production-oriented and a people-oriented role, is faced with the need to play a leadership role in critical economic and social problems. Thus, in a general sense, HRD's role is both economic and social. The development of human resources is fundamental to improving economic productivity and quality of life.

Global trends including technological advances, global interconnections and communications, shifting demographics, environmental concerns, economic cycles, and changing employee and customer expectations affect the role that HRD plays and will continue to play throughout the world. By enhancing organizations' capacity to learn and change more quickly, HRD facilitates individual and organizational adaptation and

progress in a turbulent world. We have seen a widening gap between those that have and do not have economic security and prosperity, often coupled with a knowledge and skills gap. HRD has the opportunity "to pave the way for a level of thinking and code of practice that enhances performance and stimulates greater enlightenment and meaning in people's lives."

2. Needs Assessment in HRD

The first article deals with needs assessment for HRD. HRD needs assessment is an investigative process whose purpose is to connect an organization's performance problems or opportunities for performance improvement to specific HRD interventions. In simple terms it is a systematic process for identifying the gap between a current level of performance, or "what is", and a desired level of performance, "what should be".

2.1. What Are Needs?

The term "need" can be somewhat ambiguous. What one person considers a need, another may consider a want or desire, leading to the terms "felt" and "actual" needs. In some cases, felt needs are actually symptoms of deeper actual needs. For example, a group of employees expresses a felt need for stress management training. Upon investigation, however, the actual need may be to ameliorate or eliminate the sources of stress, such as noise, inefficient work processes, or ineffective supervisory practices.

2.2. Purpose and Levels of Needs Assessment

A comprehensive needs assessment provides a systematic way to research performance gaps, which can then provide substance and direction for strategic HRD planning, including the identification of performance improvement initiatives that are likely to provide the best return on HRD investments. Training needs assessments, for example, can determine levels of optimal performance and standards for excellence, evidence of individuals' actual performance levels, attitudes affecting performance, and root causes of performance problems. Although the needs assessment process is often skipped or cut short, for a variety of reasons, a well-researched needs assessment can help avoid wasted time, effort, and money. As Drucker has pointed out, "There is nothing so useless as doing efficiently that which should not be done at all."

The type of information needed affects the focus of a needs assessment. Needs within an organization may be assessed at a high strategic level, a departmental or functional level, a team or group level, or at the individual level. The organization's performance within the context of the wider society might also serve as the focus of a needs assessment. Choosing an appropriate level of assessment is critical to the resulting analysis.

2.3. Steps and Methodologies

Berger provides suggestions for framing the needs assessment process, based on three elements: organization characteristics, decision-maker characteristics, and analyst characteristics. Numerous needs assessment models exist, and include steps such as the following:

1. Define the goals/objectives of the assessment.
2. Develop an initial plan.
3. Gain management commitment.
4. Identify the data needed.
5. Identify sources of data.
6. Select the most appropriate methodologies for the assessment.
7. Collect the data.
8. Analyze the results.
9. Resolve disagreements in interpretation of the results.
10. Prioritize the needs.
11. Compile and present your findings.

Techniques for data collection may include observation, surveys or questionnaires, one-on-one interviews, phone interviews, focus groups, tests, analysis of existing performance data, job and task analysis, critical incident surveys, and reviews of professional literature, conference reports and other benchmarking sources.

2.4. The Link to Evaluation

Needs assessment is the first step of a planned performance improvement cycle. The results of the needs assessment can be used as the basis for evaluating the outcomes of the HRD initiative: Were the needs identified in the needs assessment satisfied as a result of the HRD initiative? Since evaluation frequently uncovers new needs that must be analyzed, the evaluation step often leads back to the beginning of the cycle, and so the cycle continues.

2.5. Guidelines

Some of the guidelines for carrying out an effective needs assessment include:

- Use a performance model appropriate to the organization.
- Start as far up in the organization as possible when analyzing performance issues.
- Use a variety of techniques for gathering data.
- Keep the assessment short but complete.
- View needs assessment as an investment, not a cost, and market it that way to management.
- Be flexible.
- Consider timing.
- Consider the audience when reporting the results.

Finally, when assessing needs, consider not only performance as observed in the past, but also future performance needs.

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Biographical Sketch

Dr. Nancy Berger is an assistant professor and director of the Adult Education and Human Resource Development graduate programs at Virginia Commonwealth University. Prior to joining VCU, she was the president and owner of Training for Performance, Inc., a consulting firm specializing in the design, development, and implementation of both technical and management training and development programs. Her clients have included the United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO), Philip Morris, Nabisco, Markel Insurance, Tredegar Corporation, the Malaysian Institute of Management, and many others. She has also served as on-line professor with Capella University, as well as spending several years as an assistant professor of HRD at George Washington University. Her corporate experience has included designing e-learning and other training design at Cisco Systems, Inc., and 13 years at Dominion Virginia Power in various training design positions.

Dr. Berger has also served as a volunteer executive with the International Executive Service Corps, in Russia, and as a visiting professor at the Far East Academy of Economics and Management in

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Her professional preparation has included a PhD in Human Resource Development from Virginia Commonwealth University, a Masters in French from the University of Virginia, and a Graduate French Teaching Certificate from the Université de Nice, France.

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