HRD STRATEGIES MAKING A DIFFERENCE IN REGIONAL AUSTRALIA: IMPLICATIONS FOR LOCAL ACTION IN A GLOBAL CONTEXT

Abstract

Effective Human Resource Development (HRD) has long been recognised as a critical element in overall organisational strategy, and in turn is important to the ongoing sustainability of organisations. In this paper, the importance of effective HRD strategies and interventions are considered, particularly in the context of a rapidly changing environment, requiring those within the organisation to change past behaviours and accumulate new knowledge at an ever-growing rate; more recently referred to as unlearning. Based on research undertaken in organisations located in regional Queensland and the Northern Territory, Australia, it is argued that effective HRD strategies are just as important in these locations as anywhere else. The level of consideration given to unlearning as a component of broader HRD initiatives, along with the systems utilised to reinforce learning in these organisations is analysed. The results of the survey provide some initial perceptions of the importance of unlearning, as well as an indication of the mechanisms being utilised to reinforce unlearning and ensure that new learning is embedded.

Keywords: learning, unlearning, HRD, sanctions, incentives

INTRODUCTION

Human resource development (HRD) is seen as one of the key issues in the development of human capital. It has long been argued that HRD must not be viewed as simply the training function within the organisation, but rather should be seen as integral to overall organisational strategy. Effective HRD must be able to balance a number of considerations in order to deliver effective outcomes. First, it must reflect and support the overall strategic direction of the organisation, and as this direction is implemented, provide support to enable the achievement of goals. Second, the HRD interventions must be contingently designed to take into account any resistance to change encountered at both an individual and organisational level. Finally, the interventions need to be an integral part of other HRM systems including performance management and recognition and reward systems.

Drawing on a recently conducted survey of employers in regional Queensland and Northern Territory, Australia, this paper examines the approaches taken by employers to the important issues of unlearning, reinforcement of learning, and embedding of learning. In particular, it identifies the current methods being utilised to achieve these outcomes.

The paper begins with a review of the existing literature in the areas of learning, unlearning, and reinforcement, and then provides the findings of the survey particularly in relation to embedding learning and overcoming resistance to learning. Finally, some conclusions are drawn as to the implications for HRD strategies and interventions.

HRD has evolved as a critical element of broader business and human resource management strategies. The importance of an appropriately skilled and developed workforce is becoming recognised by most in business. In this, the knowledge era, it is recognised that HRD has the

ability to make the difference between mediocre and highly successful businesses. When considering organisations located in regional locations, the challenges of HRD become even more complex, as elements such as workforce flexibility, workforce mobility and skills shortages become more apparent. Coupled with these challenges is the growing recognition that mere learning alone, either at an individual or organisational level, will not necessarily be sufficient to allow organisations to make the changes necessary for long-term sustainability. Finally, even when learning and changes in behaviour occur, organisations must consider the embedding of these new behaviours and often HR systems such as performance management, recognition and reward are advocated as effective methods of achieving these long-term changes. In considering these particular issues, a review of the literature provides a general overview of the critical issues, particularly in relation to the emerging concept of unlearning, and of the more developed area of recognition and reward.

LEARNING AND UNLEARNING

The concept of unlearning has not received as much attention in the literature, as that of adult and workplace learning, with the most writing about unlearning being done over the last twenty years. However, many writers in the areas of learning and change have recognised this process, even if they have not utilised the term unlearning (Anderson & Boocock, 2002; Bridges, 1991; Duffy, 2003; Hayes & Allinson, 1998). As Hayes and Allinson (1998:848) point out; "in today's turbulent and complex environment, old ways of behaving may fail to produce the required results and the organization may be faced with the need to change, to modify the rules, and encourage new behaviours in order to ensure its continued competitiveness and survival." Therefore, unlearning has become of great interest to practitioners and academics alike.

Those who have used the term unlearning have used it in a number of different contexts. Some have referred to this concept in terms of individuals undergoing a process of abandoning or releasing old ways and embracing new behaviours, ideas or actions (Baxter, 2000; Bridges, 1991; Duffy, 2003). Whilst others have focussed more upon organisations, as a system, releasing previous methods and approaches in order to accommodate changing environments and circumstances internal to the organisation (Hamel & Prahalad, 1994; Hedberg, 1981; Klein, 1989). In the research reported in this paper unlearning at the micro level is of greatest interest in terms of HRD interventions, however it is also recognised that unlearning must also occur and be reinforced at the organisational level.

Sinkula (2002) considers different types of learning and suggests that unlearning equates to the concept of double loop learning introduced by Argyris and Schon (1978). Double loop learning refers to learners engaging in questioning underlying assumptions regarding decisions and knowledge. Sun & Scott (2003) suggest that double loop learning requires the learner to discard obsolete knowledge, and thus is advocating that unlearning must form part of the double loop learning process. Unlearning is also paralleled with the concept of generative learning defined by Senge (1990:14) as "learning that enhances our capacity to create". Single loop learning is then described as not discarding (or unlearning) but adding incrementally to existing routines in order to improve.

The concept of organisational memory has arisen in this debate around types of learning. Just as it has been claimed that an "expert" in a particular field is likely to experience more difficulty in letting go of old ways and embracing new possibilities, likewise it is being suggested that organisations as a whole also face this dilemma. Markoczy (1994:10) claims that "as a result of learning, organizations attain a higher level of efficiency in carrying out

their routines but, at the same time, they build competency barriers against adopting new routines." These barriers, or resistance to unlearning at both an individual and organisational level may be encountered for a number of reasons. It has been suggested that those considered to be experts in a particular field may be the worst at unlearning as they have invested a lot of time and resources into their current knowledge and therefore may have quite entrenched beliefs (Zell, 2003). Knowles & Saxberg (1988) likewise suggest that those who have invested heavily in their current knowledge may not be willing to unlearn, hence suggesting a perceived threat to existing power relationships. Argyris & Schon (1978) warn that organisational memory may encourage single loop learning rather than double loop learning, as experience becomes entrenched in the organisation. For the purposes of this study therefore, it may be inferred that those organisations considered to have a greater organisational memory may need to consider unlearning more than those that do not.

There are a number of models which have been offered in relation to unlearning. Hedberg (1981) suggests that new knowledge simply replaces old knowledge as an individual learns more; much like overwriting or accretion. It is not considered to be the same as forgetting where information is lost regardless of its usefulness. Hedberg (1981) sees the two processes as happening simultaneously proposing that knowledge both increases and becomes obsolete, or is discarded as the situation changes. This discarding activity often referred to as unlearning is seen to be as crucial as gaining new knowledge, and the lack of ability to engage in unlearning is reported as a "crucial weakness of many organizations" (Hedberg, 1981: 3).

Klein (1989) alternately put forward a parenthetic model of unlearning suggesting that the old knowledge is not erased, but maintained (in parentheses as it were) for situations where it is believed that the new knowledge does not apply, and is therefore suggesting that a decision is

then made as to what behaviour is appropriate based upon the context of the situation. In fact, in part, there is caution expressed about the widespread use of the notion of unlearning. Klein (1989) is suggesting that to improve, it is essential to learn a new method for selecting from a repertoire of responses or tactics; emphasising that if unlearning is being considered in the context of improving organisations, then simply replacing one discrete behaviour or skill with another is insufficient. In this case, focussing upon the change of frames of reference/mindsets/theories of action is being advocated. Regardless of the way in which unlearning may happen, it is still being recognised that prior knowledge is an important consideration in the HRD process.

There is also another approach to unlearning referred to as "Old Way/New Way", with its origins based in educational psychology, which was first proposed by Lyndon (1989) and utilised as an approach to remedial teaching in the education system; again recognising the role of prior knowledge in learning. It was noted that, "…for teachers and parents…when confronting errors of … children, they are confronting a problem of knowledge, not its absence" (Lyndon, 1989:33). In essence, what is suggested by the Old Way/New Way approach to unlearning is that rather than ignore previous knowledge, it must be acknowledged and actively worked with, in order to allow incorporation of new knowledge and behaviours. In the survey conducted for this research, HR Mangers in organisations were asked to indicate the level of consideration given to this previous knowledge as a part of the process of change and development within their organisation.

LePine et al (2000) suggest that to address the rapidly changing organisational environment, rather than providing training courses which can often be outdated quickly, organisations may choose to develop their employees in terms of their ability to adapt and handle change (or

unlearn). They too caution that "although this approach has great potential, research in this area is fairly new and there are many issues that need to be resolved before it can be used effectively in applied settings" (LePine et al., 2000:564). Kim (1993:46) also suggests that "individual mental models play a pivotal role, yet that is precisely an area where we know little and there is little to observe. One challenge is to find ways to make these mental models explicit; another is to manage the way these mental models are transferred into the organizational memory." An increasing number of academics are advocating the importance of considering and recognising the role of prior knowledge, behaviours and mental models as an integral part of any learning process, hence making it a key consideration in developing and implementing HRD strategy.

REINFORCEMENT AND SANCTIONS

In this study, respondents were also asked to indicate the methods and systems used to reinforce learning and ensure that new knowledge and behaviours were embedded within the organisation and the individuals involved in HRD interventions. In contrast to unlearning, literature on recognition and reward abounds, and has been the subject of extensive research. Tyler (2003) maintains that old models of management focus on command and control strategies of motivation. These strategies encourage those in authority to direct the activities of people in the organisation using surveillance linked to incentives and sanctions. These strategies allow managers to secure one type and level of co-operation. Tyler (2003) argues that in a dynamically changing environment, voluntary co-operation is important both in terms of following rules and in terms of exhibiting desirable behaviours. While different types of behaviours can be motivated by incentives and sanctions, voluntary behaviours are especially valuable to organisations. Tyler (2003) also suggests that effective leadership and the desire of followers to follow rules and help the group is a more reliable way to secure co-

operation than through incentives or sanctions. In this study, respondents were asked about the nature of incentives and sanctions and the extent to which they were utilised.

Coyle-Shapiro (1995) argues that when the focus of change is exclusively on training and education as the mechanisms to affect change, top management may have to use rewards and sanctions at their disposal in addition to other mechanisms. According to Englehardt and Simmons (2002) incentives and reinforcements can be used to pressure people into adopting changes. Such pressures and incentives may, in some cases, help provoke both desired and unwanted changes within the organisation. Pressure to learn often comes from group norms and from a simple awareness of the skills acquired by others and the available opportunities to learn new ways of doing a job. Englehardt, and Simmons (2002) argue that another motivational mechanism put forward by Katzell and Thompson (1990 as cited in Englehardt et al., 2002) included the concept of extrinsic reinforcements such as financial rewards, personal recognition, and self-management programs. Self-management is, according to Englehardt and Simmons (2002), consistent with suggested voluntary training opportunities, and reinforcement approaches provide an important way to promote the culture of learning in work settings. In striving for a more productive organisation that attempts to leverage productivity through people, Grieves (2000) argued that it was important to create awareness that employees' efforts are essential to change and that employees working towards change will share in the rewards of the company's success. Harrison (1996 cited in Grieves, 2000) argues that there are six functions that an organization's ideology performs and one of these is that the ideology depicts which qualities and characteristics of the organization's members will be valued or vilified, as well as how these should be rewarded or punished.

When considering how organisations in this study approach the development of their human resources, the extent to which they then utilised reinforcement or sanctions was also of interest. Many have argued that appropriate leadership and workforce involvement is sufficient to reinforce new behaviours and knowledge however, it is anticipated that in most organisations many managers still believe reinforcement and sanctions are necessary.

RESEARCH AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

Given an increasing emphasis on learning it is important that some consideration of unlearning and its role in human resource development, is considered. In this study, it was considered critical to assess the extent to which organisations are now considering how to assist individuals in the process of discarding previous behaviour and/or knowledge. So, as part of a larger study, data were collected to determine the extent to which organisations are considering this factor and the methods they are utilising to reinforce unlearning.

The results reported in this paper are based upon a survey conducted with employers throughout regional Queensland and the Northern Territory with the overall aim of determining pre-employment qualifications, training and development strategies and the nature and content of post-appointment training. The objectives of the study were to examine minimum and preferred entry qualifications and the nature and types of training that are prevalent in regional centres. In particular the study aimed to:

- Determine any training schemes, professional development programmes or additional qualifications that managers expect employees to undertake after commencing employment;

As part of this objective, two questions were asked of the respondents:

- When designing training, what level of consideration is given to abolishing "old ways" of doing things which are no longer applicable?, and

- Following training, which of the following methods (if any) are used to ensure that employees do not revert back to their previous behaviours/habits?

It is these questions that will be analysed within this paper to provide an indication of the degree to which unlearning and reinforcement is considered as an integral part of HRD strategies.

METHODOLOGY

This study utilised a self-administered questionnaire that was predominantly distributed by mail. The questionnaire was based upon a previously administered survey (Miller, Acutt, & Kellie, 2002) however additional questions were added based upon the requirement to extend the study to consider recruitment and selection approaches, and training and development strategies. Potential participant organisations were contacted in order to ascertain their interest in contributing to the study, and then survey were posted or emailed. Those organisations not responding within a month were contacted again in an attempt to obtain further responses however, the response rate was still considered poor.

Sample

The population frame consisted of employers, both public and private sector, in non-metropolitan Queensland and the Northern Territory who were listed on the databases of either the Australian Institute of Management or MGES Recruitment. The convenience sample of firms was drawn from the service, resources and manufacturing sectors. Seventy responses were received at the time of this analysis. The respondents were predominantly HR

managers or professionals, or operational managers. The survey was presented in four

sections; organisational overview including employment and turnover, recruitment and

selection practices, general information on qualifications, training and development, and

finally a section on qualifications, training and development in relation to specific categories

of employees. The first three sections contained predominantly Likert scales or forced choice

items. The final section provided matrices and asked respondents to indicated qualifications

required, as well as requesting information on specific training via open-ended questions.

Of those responding, 52 (76%) of respondents were located in non-metropolitan Queensland

and 10 (15%) in the Northern Territory. In terms of industry representation within the

sample, the industries with the highest representation (50% of respondents) came from the

four sectors classified as public administration and defence; finance, property and business

services; mining; and professional services. The remainder were spread across twelve other

nominated sectors, representing a broad range of industries. With regards to the type of

businesses responding, single business units (private or public) represented 49% (33) of

respondents; branches or franchises represented 26% (18) and public service represented 25%

(17).

FINDINGS

This section commences by providing an overview of the participating organisations;

particularly in relation to size and labour turnover as both these factors can impact on

organisational memory, learning and unlearning. For example, large organisations with low

turnover would have a greater corporate memory than smaller organisations with a very high

turnover. The broad findings in relation to unlearning and ways of maintaining unlearning

and reinforcing new behaviours are then examined. Cross-tabulations are then used to

examine differences between the organisations and to determine if any significant differences exist based on size and labour turnover in relation to the HRD interventions and reinforcement approaches being utilised.

OVERVIEW OF THE ORGANISATIONS

When reporting these findings, it is important to be cognisant of the fact that all organisations are located in regional locations. Therefore, while there has been an increasing trend towards casualisation of the workforce on a broader scale, most of the firms surveyed (see Table 1) were predominantly employing full time staff, although casuals were more likely to be employed by large firms. In part, this can be explained by the need to offer full time positions in order to attract staff into regional businesses.

Group of employees	Average Distribution of Staff by Employment Type		
	Full time	Part time	Casual/ Contract
50 or less employees (n=39) 56%	80%	11%	9%
More than 50 employees (n=31) 44%	72%	7%	21%

Table 1. Distribution of companies by type of employees' contract in 2003

The staff turnover in the organisations surveyed, as can be seen in Table 2, is spread from a relatively low turnover of less than 2% annually in less than 16% of firms, to substantial turnover of 8+% in 40% of firms. This high level turnover is typical of organisations in regional areas and results in recruitment difficulties as reported by DEWR (2003), which details significant shortages and recruitment difficulties in regional Queensland and the Northern Territory. This level of turnover creates specific challenges in relation to HRD strategies and interventions in terms of maintaining adequate skill levels. However, high turnover can have a positive impact on organisational unlearning as it reduces both the strength and amount of organisational memory, which can result in a lesser commitment to previous practices and greater willingness to try new or different ways.

Range	Number Responding	Percentage of total answers
under 2%	11	15.7%
2-5%	18	25.7%
5-8%	13	18.6%
8-15%	18	26%
over 15%	10	14%
No answer/No applicable	0	0%
Total	**70**	**100.0%**

Table 2. Estimated labour turnover in company

Specifically in relation to considering prior knowledge and behaviours, and the possible need to relinquish these, the survey asked respondents about the degree of consideration given to unlearning. This consideration has been analysed in relation to both organisational size and turnover to determine whether differences exist in the data, based upon these two factors.

From Table 3, it is evident that larger firms (50+employees) gave far more consideration to unlearning, with almost 13% of respondents reporting that unlearning is the entire focus of much of their training and HRD initiatives. This contrasts significantly with only 5% of smaller firms indicating this to be the case. Adding to the strength of this difference, 10% of those in smaller firms identified that they address the issue of unlearning rarely, if at all. This again contrasts significantly to larger firms, with no respondents indicating this to be the case.

There are thought to be three key contributing factors to this significant difference. Firstly, larger firms tend to have a dedicated HRD function, and are therefore more likely to have a more structured and sophisticated approach to the development of employees. Secondly, and as a result of this, larger companies are also more likely to offer formal training programs (often designed in-house or customised to suit the organisation) which in turn means that there is more opportunity to target issues such as unlearning. Finally, it can also be suggested

that larger firms, with less flexibility, require more focus on unlearning, as systems and structures provide more opportunity for employees to become entrenched in current practices, making unlearning critical.

Level of consideration given to abolishing old ways	50 or less employees n=39	Greater than 50 employees n=31
Rarely if ever considered	10.3%	0.0%
Considered but only in terms of replacing "old ways" with "new ways"	38.5%	29.0%
Seen as an integral part of development and delivery of training	43.6%	58.1%
The entire focus of the training	5.1%	12.9%
No answer/No applicable	2.5%	0.0%
Total	**100.0%**	**100.0%**

Table 3. Unlearning consideration by company size

Table 4 examines the relationship between unlearning and labour turnover. Those respondents rarely considering unlearning, as opposed to those who consider unlearning as an integral part of their HRD strategies, reinforce that organisations with higher labour turnover need to focus less on unlearning due to the reduced impact of factors such as organisational memory. Over 7% of those with higher turnover report rarely, if ever, considering unlearning; significantly more than those with a lower turnover. Reinforcing this, is the fact that over 14% of those with a low turnover report unlearning to be the key focus of their training. None of those with high turnover reported unlearning as having this level of significance in their HRD interventions. These results reinforce the supposition that a weaker organisational memory due to the higher turnover, means the importance of unlearning is lessened, as there becomes less need to relinquish entrenched behaviours.

Level of consideration given to abolishing old ways	8% or less n=42	Greater than 8% n=28
Rarely if ever considered	4.76%	7.14%
Considered but only in terms of replacing "old ways" with "new ways"	30.95%	39.29%
Seen as an integral part of development and delivery of training	47.62%	53.57%
The entire focus of the training	14.29%	0.00%
No answer/No applicable	2.38%	0%
Total	**100.00%**	**100.00%**

Table 4. Unlearning consideration by labour turnover in company

The second key area of focus related to how the respondents ensured that learning was

embedded, and that those involved in HRD interventions did not revert to old knowledge and

behaviours. Those firms, both large and small, who considered unlearning, used coaching

and performance feedback to ensure that employees did not revert to the old ways of getting

the job done. It is pleasing to note, in Table 5, that most firms did not use sanctions alone

although some large firms (6.5%) used only sanctions. This is most likely because of the

larger number of employees and the ability of the HR function to implement sanctions

without being accused of victimisation. Closer working relationships in smaller firms can

mean that employers are more likely to use positive methods before resorting to sanctions. It

is also related to the close ties in regional communities between employees and employers,

most notably occurring in small firms.

Method	50 or less employees n=39	Greater than 50 employees n=31
Coaching and performance feedback	71.8%	67.7%
Sanctions and/or penalties	0.0%	6.5%
Both	12.8%	25.8%
Neither	15.4%	0.0%
Total	**100.0%**	**100.0%**

Table 5. Method of reinforcement of training by company size

When examining the relationship between the organisation's labour turnover and techniques to reinforce unlearning and encourage the use of new behaviours, it is apparent in Table 6 that firms with low turnover are more likely to use coaching and performance feedback than firms with higher turnover. Firms with high turnover are more likely to use either a combination of sanctions and coaching and feedback, or neither approach to overcome the likelihood of past practices and behaviour being utilised.

Method	8% or less n=42	Greater than 8% n=28
Coaching and performance feedback	78.6%	57.1%
Sanctions and/or penalties	2.4%	3.6%
Both	11.9%	28.6%
Neither	7.1%	10.7%
Total	**100.0%**	**100.0%**

Table 6. Method of reinforcement of training by labour turnover in company

As well as coaching and sanctions, the respondents were also asked about their use of alternate methods of reinforcement. Whilst over 88% indicated they did not use specific methods apart from coaching and sanctions, of the 11% who did, 3% indicated they used additional training (either top-up training or retraining), and another 3% indicated the use of specific incentives or rewards. Other specific methods included the use of checksheets, guests surveys and a process to get management feedback.

DISCUSSION AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Using data from a wider study conducted with employers from regional Queensland and the Northern Territory, this paper has focussed on the degree of consideration given to unlearning, and the approaches to unlearning used by managers as part of their overall HRD strategy. Whilst it is recognised that the results of this pilot study represent only a small sample of employers throughout regional Queensland and the Northern Territory, it has

provided some significant insights into HRD and reinforcement strategies, in order to inform a more comprehensive analysis of broader human resource management and development practices in regional Australia.

The high levels of turnover found are representative of those described by the Department of Employment and Workplace Relations (DEWR, 2003) and are associated with problems of recruitment. Whilst this turnover is often claimed to be cause for concern in terms of ensuring adequate staffing levels, in light of the findings of this research, it may also be seen as a way to avoid the limitations caused by an extensive organisational memory, in turn assisting to facilitate organisational change.

Consideration of unlearning, as an integral part of embedding new learning, was seen to be more important by large firms than by small firms, and more important for those with lower turnover. It is suggested that larger firms have less flexibility and therefore require HRD strategies to ensure that unlearning occurs. It may also be the case that large organisations with a defined HRD function are more aware of the importance of unlearning. For those organisations with high turnover, it is suggested that the continual influx of new employees with new methods and ideas may provide a catalyst to unlearning without the necessity for specific HRD interventions.

Both large and small firms were found to use coaching and performance feedback to imbed learning. It is interesting to note that only large firms reported the use of sanctions or penalties alone as a tactic, whereas no small firms reported such an approach. Future research should focus on why this tactic is used predominantly by large firms, as it has been assumed that this relates closely to the more distant working relationships experienced in larger

organisations. This phenomenon might have its genesis in the relative anonymity associated in using such a tactic in large firms or less fear of being accused of victimisation. Large firms were also more than twice as likely to use a combination of coaching and performance feedback and sanctions and penalties than small firms.

The other point of interest and possible future research is the high use of coaching and performance feedback in small firms to imbed training. The approach to coaching and performance feedback in small organisations as compared to that used in large firms is also of interest. Why 15.4% of small firms in the survey used neither of the tactics offered is also an area for future research and has been partly broached in this paper

CONCLUSION

Overall, the findings suggest that in a practical sense, the emerging issue of unlearning is recognised by a broad range of organisations. Even in regional areas, it is recognised that HRD strategies need to ensure that learning keeps pace with change, and even though smaller firms may report different approaches, they are nonetheless considering skill development issues as part of a broader business strategy. In particular, most of the organisations at least recognised the importance of providing support and interventions to allow staff to relinquish previous behaviours, in order to learn. Many also reported using both incentives and sanctions to reinforce learning and ensure that employees do not revert to previous behaviours.

The issue of unlearning and techniques to ensure that employees do not revert to past practices are issues with which HRD professionals and some managers in small enterprises are grappling. There is clearly a need for further empirical work to examine unlearning and

how employers can effectively and proactively ensure that once changes have been implemented employees do not return to tried and true past practice. In this study we have demonstrated that managers in regionally based organisations have used performance feedback, training and in some cases sanctions to reinforce unlearning of past behaviours and to prevent or reduce employees reverting to old ways. More work needs to be done to understand unlearning and to determine the most effective ways to encourage this relinquishing of past behaviours in order to incorporate new ones. It is also important to further understand the efficacy of different techniques used to ensure that reverting to past practice does not occur. While a great deal has been written and debated about the usefulness of individual and organisational learning more needs to be done if we are to understand unlearning and how it can best be facilitated.

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