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ABSTRACT

Changing the name of human resource development (HRD) is not the wisest course of action given HRD's current state. A renamed HRD would still be the current, ambiguous, ill-defined field struggling to establish its identity and stalled in issues about what is central to the profession, how the profession adds value to the world, and what HRD professionals do now and need to do in the future. A title that would better reflect the theory and practice of the field must be grounded in a considerable and multi-pronged study of the field's history, philosophical foundations, current roles, and future trends. Furthermore, the community of HRD would have to be able to fluently justify why the new term better reflects the domain. Rather than spotlighting the proposition to rename HRD, the community of HRD scholars and practitioners should be focusing on coordinated action that will further and strengthen the profession and its professionals. (Contains 37 references) (YLB)

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What's in a Name? Human Resource Development and its Core

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Changing the name of HRD is not the wisest course of action given HRD's current state. Our efforts would be better invested in deeply investigating and drawing out the core commonalities spanning multiple HRD professionals, contexts, and emerging paradigms. A name that would better reflect the theory and practice of the profession requires considerable, multi-pronged, and on-going study of the field's history, philosophical paradigms, current roles, and future trends.

Keywords: Defining HRD, Philosophy; Professionalization

It is not uncommon to hear stakeholders, clients, colleagues, and students questioning the efficacy of the term "Human Resource Development", especially as they begin to understand more about the value that HRD can add. This issue flared during the Future Search Conference (Weisbord & Janoff, 1999) sponsored by ASTD and AHRD (Academy of Human Resource Development) during Summer, 2001 and was identified as a major barrier in thinking about and planning for the future. What was it, *really*, that we were searching for the future of? Was it HRD? Was it workplace learning and performance? Was it not limited to the workplace or worker? Was it more than learning? Was it really about performance? What about organizational development and the role of OD in HRD? The name was thought to be quite limiting and ambiguous for this expansive yet coherent profession that is capable of doing so much more than what seems implied by the name.

I can hardly disagree. I am a faculty member in a program that is titled "Human Resources & Organizational Development" because we felt the need to better describe our commitment to preparing professionals for a role that is much broader and deeper than that of a traditional trainer. The efficacy of the term HRD does indeed need to be reflected upon. That said, as a researcher in HRD, it is clear to me that changing the name of the profession at this time will do little to answer the questions that distress us. We have no clear alternative name to consider, the current name is historically and socially anchored (and there are immense challenges in doing the same for a new name), and, most importantly, changing the name will likely only propel us into debates that are exactly like those we are having today—wondering and deliberating about what is and is not core to the field and whether this new name reflects it. These themes are all discussed below. This paper then argues that the efforts of HRD professionals would be better invested in taking a firm stand towards professionalization and in increasingly understanding and bounding HRD as a profession. Rather than arguing for the efficacy of the term, this is an argument against renaming the field without a compelling and well-legitimized alternative name that inspires coordinated action.

A Rose By Any Other Name....

Juliet asked Romeo, "What's in a name?" and went on to express her now infamous reasoning, "that which we call a rose by any word would still smell as sweet" (Shakespeare, 1595). This quote adequately represents the crux of the argument presented below. In this case, a renamed HRD would still be the current HRD we live in today. It would still be an ambiguous, ill-defined field struggling to establish its identity and stalled in issues about what is central to the profession, how the profession adds value to the world, and what HRD professionals do now and need to do in the future.

What to Change It To?

The immediate question that comes to mind when contemplating a name change is quite simply, "to what?" There is widespread agreement in the HRD literature that there is little consensus on the purpose, location, alternative philosophies, and theoretical foundations of the field (Lee, 2001; Garavan, Gunnigle & Morley, 2000; Hatcher, 2000; McGoldrick, Stewart & Watson, 2001; McLean & McLean, 2001; Ruona, 2000b; Weinberger, 1998). Indeed this lack of consensus inspired one of AHRD's journals, *Human Resource Development International*, to devote a whole issue (4:3) to the debate around defining and definitions in HRD.

There have been over 20 definitions of HRD forwarded since 1970 when Nadler conceptualized of a field called Human Resource Development. Nadler himself went on to revise his definition of HRD throughout his 30+ years of

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advocating for the emerging profession. These definitions vary in their focus, prescriptions, philosophies of development, and beneficiaries (Ruona & Swanson, 1998). Recently, a vocal perspective has emerged that emphasizes the breadth, diversity (McLean & McLean, 2001), multidisciplinary (McGoldrick et al, 2001), and indefinability (Lee, 2001; Mankin, 2001) of the field. These authors point to the dynamic, continuously emerging nature of work required of those we call HRD professionals and advocate a fluid, unfolding meaning of the current name.

What has clearly not emerged is an active and vocal community that is focusing on what these 20+ definitions or the rapidly changing work of HRD professionals have *in common* over time and context. Ruona & Swanson's (1998) analysis of definitions identified four major areas of convergence within these many definitions as (1) emphasizing development, (2) advocating multiple interventions (i.e. not just training), (3) focus on individual, and (4) link to work and work-related development. Weinberger (1998) identified 5 dominant theoretical domains that these definitions share: learning, performance improvement, systems theory, economics, and psychology. Grieves & Redman (1999) suggest that four central characteristics of HRD are: (1) the use of HRD as a strategic intervention, (2) emphasizing the active role of line managers, (3) active, proactive, and continual people development/learning, and (4) work-based learning. And, more recently, a study of OD practice found that the most frequently listed activities of 250 OD consultants were eight project focus areas that are often described in the literature (Frey, Schroder, Wheeler & Johnson, 1999).

Even with this handful of pieces and many years of competency and activity surveys such as those produced by ASTD, the HRD scholarly literature has largely focused on the differences and variances in this emerging field. This focus on fostering the pluralism downplays deep investigation of the stable value that HRD professionals contribute and the commonalities that cut across context, organization, and country. As a result, there is no groundswell converging on a shared meaning of HRD, even at its most rudimentary level. And there is certainly no vocal majority that is able to point to the current name and legitimately critique it on empirical, theoretical, or philosophical grounds. Perhaps this is why we cannot find one piece of literature in our journals that explicitly critiques the current title of HRD. In the same vein, there have been no assertions that this term unduly limits the theory and practice of what we understand HRD to be.

Naming and Classifying: A Social "Taxonomical" View

We can also take a relevant cue on this issue from the science of classification called *Taxonomy*. Taxonomy utilizes tools and methods for describing and classifying the diversity of organisms that exist, the most-well known scheme originating from Carl Linnaeus' classification of plants and animals in the late 1700's (Cummins, 2002). In the Linnaean system of classification, when a new organism is discovered the first thing to be done is to choose a name. The name must be published and include a description of the new species. It must then be offered up to the scientific community to be further studied and described. This is precisely what has happened in HRD during the past 30+ years. Nadler coined the term "HRD" and he and others published it widely as they attempted to describe it. Descriptions of it were refined over time, and now we find ourselves entertaining the notion that the given name does not adequately reflect what HRD really is.

Here the *Law of Priority* from the science of classification (Cummins, 2002) has much relevance. It states that the name proposed first has precedence over all subsequently proposed names. The name of a species would only change if those wanting to change it offered a *convincing argument* for why the name no longer accurately described or categorized the species.

In biology this argument would be built on characteristics that organisms do or do not share and on evolutionary history. In the social world that we are discussing, our charge would be much the same. In the social world one of the truths of practical life is that people naturally classify and organize things to come to grips with and simplify the external world. While the reality of human thought is more complex, it is verifiable that when people are faced with new data they will automatically attempt to compare it to what else they know and cluster that information into similar categories. So, how has HRD come to be known in this socially constructed world during the past 30 years?

The evolutionary history of HRD is complex. In the United States, HRD is often viewed in relation to (and as a sub-set or "child") of Adult Education and of Vocational Education, two distinctive professions themselves. More over, as the field of HRD has evolved it has been inextricably linked to the diverse (and equally as abstract) field of HR (see Walton, 1999 for an excellent overview on this topic). McLagan's (1989) study defined the field in relation to the larger arena of which it was a part and, in so doing, produced the HR Wheel, which identified nine HR practice areas. McGoldrick et al (2001) state "HRD is still in the intellectual shadows of HRM, particularly with respect to HRD research in the UK" (pg. 350). Most importantly, quite often the role of HRD is *operationalized* in

organizations as a sub-set of a large function called HR and the practical work of HRD professionals greatly overlaps with much of current day HR/HRM practices.

Here in this socially constructed world, it must be accepted that HRD has been understood and institutionalized very much in relation to other disciplines, particularly HR/HRM. Changing the name of the profession will require a lengthy process of reconstructing peoples' understanding of what the field is and how it fits in the world. That demands a strong argument on our part to be able to legitimize the switch. This argument must be based on demonstration of how we are the same and different from each of our relatives. And, most importantly, this argument must be clear and compelling enough to foster a social movement that spreads this new reasoning outward.

Making Meaning: Pull or Push? It's Still Uphill

When this issue originally arose at the 2001 Future Search Conference sponsored by ASTD, the proposition was that the name was a constraint and that changing it would serve as a much needed future "pull"—that is, help to pull this ill-defined field towards a new and more shared idea of the future. Immediately I wondered whether changing the name of HRD would really help to address the true challenges facing the profession right now. The answer to that question was unclear and, in fact, the proposition seemed quite dangerous.

Changing the name will elicit similar attention that Walton (1999) describes when Personnel changed its name to Human Resources in the 1970's-1980's. It involved, he states, "whether HRM is just a new term or whether it embodies something substantially different" (Walton, 1999, pg. 123). Writers of that time critiqued the name change and wondered whether it was just the same old wine in a new bottle. Which would HRD's name change represent? Old wine repackaged to look new? Or *new* wine? And, if so, will it be better? It is clear that we have yet to gain any common and widespread understanding of the old HRD wine. To be sure there is even less understanding about any new wine. The field of HRD suffers from a lack of identity and consensus on its key tenants, and changing its name will not remedy this state.

If the name of HRD was to be changed today, without the compelling and well-legitimated alternative as described above, it would actually result in little progress for the profession. Random and reactive assignment of a new term will only confuse the present condition and reflect poorly on a field of theory and practice that has worked for the better part of the last century to gain a foothold. And for what? A new name would likely only propel us into debates that are exactly like those we're having today—wondering and debating about what is and is not core to the field and whether this new name reflects it.

Most importantly, the losses HRD professionals would feel as a result of that decision could be devastating. HRD's founders and professionals have worked tirelessly for credibility, resources, and identity and have been increasingly successful in gaining a foothold in organizations, universities, among other professions, etc... There are now millions of people around the world who earn their livelihood through practicing HRD and millions more who accept the validity of services provided under the auspices of the concept called HRD. The Academy of Human Resource Development was established in 1993 and is thriving, the profession now has four scholarly journals (all with the terms human resource development entwined in their titles), and within the last three years there have been at least four foundational books published that seek to situate HRD and capture specialized knowledge in the field (Gilley & Maycuhich, 1999; McGoldrick, Stewart & Watson, 2002; Swanson & Holton, 2001; Walton, 1999). Changing the name now would ask people of the world to re-situate all of this in their own schemas. We would also surely be questioned as "just another fad" and mistrust would undoubtedly ensue.

Changing the name right now would ask the profession to overcome two extremely risky challenges at the same time. The first we are facing right now—that is, struggling with issues of identity and centrality. Drawing boundaries that both include and exclude people, ideas, and philosophies in an ever-changing world is extremely difficult and, to some extent, goes against the carefree openness of the profession's youth. Too much of this bounding/definitional argument could put the profession at risk of exploding just as its beginning to look and act like a "whole". A change of name, though, is even more risky. This second risk will play out in the eyes and ears of the public-at-large rather than in the halls of our own community. The wiser strategy is for HRD to determine at the most basic level what is core to the field—what's within and outside of our core beliefs, roles, competencies and specialized knowledge. Then, finding a new term that better reflects this will be the easy part!

The Real Work Ahead

A title that would better reflect the theory and practice of the field must be grounded in a considerable and multi-pronged study of the field's history, philosophical foundations, current roles, and future trends. Furthermore, the

community of HRD will have to be able to fluently justify why the new term better reflects the domain. Rather than spotlighting this proposition to rename HRD, the community of HRD scholars and practitioners should be focusing on coordinated action that will further and strengthen the profession and its professionals.

Stand for Professionalism

The first and one of the most powerful things that we can each do is take a stand for professionalism. Some in HRD have asserted that the process of professionalization is no more than “a battle for occupational closure and jurisdiction between different professional bodies” (Woodall, 2001, pg. 289) waged by professional associations motivated by “political reasons—in order to patrol their boundaries, maintain their standards, and bolster their power base” (Lee, 2001, pg. 335). This kind of critique focuses heavily on the undeniable shadow side of professionalism without exploring the essence and need for professions in the 21st century.

Current theories of professionalism focus on the “institutional characteristics in which members of an occupation *rather than consumers or managers* control the work” (Freidson, 2001, pg. 12). Professions evolve out of the belief that the tasks its workers engage in require *specialized* knowledge and skill—a unique capability that requires a foundation in abstract concepts and formal learning as well as an ample dose of discretion by its professionals. Professionalization is less about defending those tasks from encroachment of competing occupations and more about claiming that the work of these professionals requires something more than everyday knowledge.

It is also fundamentally about professionals being able to optimally apply their specialized knowledge combined with their values and ideologies to do what they know to be best in any given situation, rather than letting others control how that knowledge is applied. Freidson (2001) states that professionalism guards against mere technicians who:

...serve their patrons as freelancers or hired guns. Their loyalties lie only with those who pay them.

In light of their shallow specialized knowledge, they may advise their patrons to qualify or modify their choices, but they do not claim the right to make choices for their patrons, to be independent of them, or even to violate their wishes.... The professional ideology of service goes beyond serving others' choices. Rather it claims a devotion to a transcendent value which infuses its specialization with a larger and putatively higher goal which reaches beyond those that they are supposed to serve. It is because of this claim to strive towards such values that professionals can claim independence and freedom of action rather than mere faithful service. (pg. 122).

If those of us who practice and study HRD believe that we and our colleagues fulfill a unique and valuable need in this world, and that the work we do requires specialized and discretionary knowledge, and, furthermore, that this work is built on an ideology of values that is more than just a simple commodity, then we are *obligated* to contribute to building the profession in any way that we can.

This necessarily involves identifying, elaborating, refining and growing the body of knowledge and skill underlying our work. It also demands that this specialized work be differentiated from the tasks of other occupations since activity is specialized only in relation to something else. We cannot talk of a single specialization—for one specialization to exist there must be two. They must have some relationship to each other and be defined by comparison (Freidson, 2001). This necessarily entails drawing boundaries and investing our energies in that which is our specialized domain.

The pressure for professionalization must also be considered in light of the “neopreneurialism” world (Leicht & Fennell, 2001) that is emerging and in which our practitioners must execute their work. This world is characterized by (a) flatter organizational hierarchies, (b) growing use of temporary workers hired for specific tasks, (c) extensive use of subcontracting and outsourcing, (d) massive downsizing and replacement of skilled workers, (e) post-unionized bargaining environment, and (f) virtual organizations that exist as technological webs of interaction (Leicht & Fennell, 2001). In this world professionals will be caught up in a complex web of exchanges where stakeholders apply the pressure and whose major interests remain increasing profits (raising revenue and minimizing costs) and increasing accountability. In this world, professionalization is predicted to be the dominant way of organizing work (Leicht & Fennell, 2001), and it is this world in which HRD professionals must contextualize their work and ensure that it is done with the highest of standards and the best practices that we can know or theorize about.

Bound and Understand HRD

It is clear that another key area of work facing HRD is further tackling issues of bounding and defining the field. Many scholarly positions on the topic have been asserted in the literature throughout the past seven years. The

more recent positions vary from a strong call for definition (Grieves & Redman, 1999; Sambrook, 2000) to a refusal to define HRD (Lee, 2001; McGoldrick et al, 2001). What has become increasingly problematic in this on-going discussion is that various people are calling for different levels and types of definitions and all calling their aims "definition", assuming that they are attempting to define the same thing. The scope and bounds of what is being defined in HRD vary greatly and, as a result, comparing definitions is literally comparing apples to oranges.

What is needed in HRD is a rubric for thinking about definition of the field. As a long-time advocate of "definition" myself, I have often been misinterpreted as wanting *one* way for HRD to be. This is far from where I stand! I do believe however that it would greatly serve the profession to define its primary foci of interest at the most fundamental level and then for various philosophical paradigms within this "system-in-focus", if you will, to surface and articulate their sets of core assumptions, beliefs, methods, tools, and outcomes (or purpose).

A systems perspective (see Ruona, 2001 for an overview) on this will help to explain. A system, according to Joslyn & Turchin (1993) is generally thought to require at least the following: (a) a variety of distinct entities called elements, (b) that these elements are involved in some kind of relation, and (c) that this relation is sufficient to generate a new, distinct entity, at a new, systemic level of analysis. They go on to state:

...thus in the concept of the system we see the unification of many sets of distinctions: the multiplicity of the elements and the singularity of the whole system; the dependence of the stability of the whole on the activity of the relation amongst the entities; the distinction between what is in the system and what is not; and finally the distinction between the whole system and everything else. In the activity of the relation which creates a stable whole, we recognize a closure. (website)

By this definition, HRD can most certainly be viewed as a system. It is a multi-minded entity that is somehow singular in its whole. What is needed is to agree at a high level of conceptualization about what HRD professionals are focusing on and how its various elements in HRD inter-relate to produce that more stable whole. That certainly begins by asking what is it that HRD professionals focus on that Finance, Marketing and other professions do not? HRD is a complex web of activities that is clearly distinguishable from other professions, even the closely related ones (such as HRM and Adult Education) where the boundaries are fuzzier. This emphasizes focusing on the commonalities that dwell in HRD, rather than its diversity. For instance, one would be hard pressed to find any definition or conceptual framework of HRD that does not fundamentally include the notion of learning and people development. Learning and development are both concepts and core values that seem to cut across a multitude of individuals, groups, and emerging schools of thought in HRD.

Within HRD it is also necessary to acknowledge that there are multiple sub-systems that are likely being embodied in paradigms. Since the early-1990's, for instance, two paradigms that emerged on the HRD scene and have since occupied much attention have centered on whether HRD is for the purpose of improving performance or for learning (Swanson, 1995; Watkins & Marsick, 1995). Where this definitional argument got confusing was that for a while it seemed we had to choose between the two. Nothing could be further from the truth depending on how you bound/define HRD at the larger system level. A good definition of HRD *as a profession* should be broad enough to encompass and foster multiple paradigms, contexts, and mutations as well as be specific enough to identify the commonalities that bind these paradigms and types together and that differentiate the focus of our work (i.e. specialized knowledge) from other professions. This level of definition reinforces the idea that "while we might all construct slightly different definitions and realities of HRD, there does seem to be a degree of coherence" (Sambrook, 2001, pg. 175) and some level of agreement (Stewart & McGoldrick, 1996) about what HRD is. It reinforces the idea that the system of HRD is indeed greater than the sum of its parts.

Each of these sub-systems in HRD must then be expected to surface and articulate their own coherent ideas about the aims of their work and the assumptions that lead them to their desired outcome(s). These systems of thought and action (Ruona & Lynham, 1999) must each be conceptually sound and held up to rigorous standards of consistency. This certainly fits with recent urging for HRD to improve its capacity to theorize on the basis of solid research and surface philosophical and theoretical perspectives (Lynham, 2000; McGoldrick's et al, 2001). Other authors, too, have consistently called for alternative philosophies driving action to be explicated (Kuchinke, 2000; Ruona, 2000a) to deepen theory and provide the foundations for research and practice. Holton's (2000) effort to clarify and define the performance paradigm of HRD is an excellent example of just this kind of process. Sambrook's (2000) identification of three ways of thinking about HRD in today's organizations also is representative of this kind of thinking. And Ruona's (2001) reporting demonstrates that perhaps the learning vs. performance debate is not actually the most important difference between two emerging schools of thought in HRD.

Of course, no matter how well depicted, the reality will always be messier than the portrayal, and the boundaries between these various paradigms will play out differently. Each of these various paradigms, for instance, may be carried out in parallel to each other in one organization (Swanson, 1999), and the complexity increases as the

frame widens. Furthermore, HRD professionals are still themselves grappling with what they believe to be true about HRD and are faced with quite compelling alternatives that could be combined in unique ways of their own.

Further complicating this issue is that in this dynamic and socially-constructed world often times one paradigm will take front and center stage and tend to dominate—so much so that it begins to define the whole of HRD to the public-at-large and perhaps even within the profession. It is impossible to tell right now, but many assert that the “performance paradigm” (Holton, 2000) or “strategic HRD” (Walton, 1999; Sambrook, 2000) have become the essence and focus of modern-HRD (Bassi & Van Buren, 1999). We may be able to only know that in hindsight just as Mintzberg (1994) asserts organizations can only know their strategy as a pattern that emerged out of coordinated action.

What is clear from this discussion, though, is that it is vitally important to view this issue of definition as a dynamic process of multiple paradigms emerging, persuading, dominating, and fading while in the process the whole remaining largely stable and more than the sum of its parts. It is also clear that we must suspend asking only the question, “What is HRD?” and begin asking at least a few different questions. For instance, we should be asking:

- What paradigms can be identified in HRD right now?
- What is it that those philosophical schools of thought share *in common*?
- Which paradigm(s) are currently dominating and which one(s) are emerging or quietly contributing to the larger whole? How is that continuing to shape the whole?

This view of definition focuses more on our commonalities than on our differences, and more on inclusion rather than exclusion. Boundaries of this type will better equip HRD to focus on building a common body of knowledge and will foster discipline in our theorizing by demanding that we articulate the assumptions driving scholarly and practical work within them. This view also reminds us to be ever conscious and respectful of the dynamic and creative tension that emerges from these multiple lenses through which we can view HRD.

Conclusion

Renaming the profession of HRD is not an issue to be taken lightly. Although the notion is not entirely without merit, this paper has aimed to at least raise reasonable doubt that this is not the wisest course of action given HRD’s current state. Rather it has argued that the efforts of HRD scholars and practitioners would be better invested in more deeply investigating the whole and parts of HRD and by drawing out the commonalities that are core to HRD professionals, contexts, and emerging paradigms. Only then will we be better positioned to judge the efficacy of the current name.

If it is to happen, it is clear that the onus will be on those seeking to change the name. They will need to build a case that clearly demonstrates that the current term does not sufficiently capture the essence of the profession or that the term unduly limits the theory and practice of what we understand HRD to be. They will also need to generate a compelling alternative name and be able legitimize it, which, of course, will itself be an act of definition. This brings us to one of the great paradoxes of this debate. Whether the name is changed now or changed later after the due consideration solicited in this paper, definitional issues will still remain. The pay-off in changing it later is keeping this dialogue within our own community rather than risking external credibility. The benefit is also in knowing that, if and when we do change the name, it will be for sound reasons that a majority of HRD professionals believe in and are willing to live everyday—that it will be a name that fosters coordinated action and strengthens the capacity of HRD professionals to carry out excellent practice.

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