PERSPECTIVES ON PRACTICE

Creating a Career Culture: Connection and Collaboration

Kimberly S. McDonald
Professor
Division of Organizational Leadership & Supervision
Indiana University-Purdue University Fort Wayne

Linda M. Hite
Professor
Division of Organizational Leadership & Supervision
Indiana University-Purdue University Fort Wayne

Changes in the career landscape require commensurate revisions in career development (CD) to ensure it meets the needs of both employees and employers in this era of multidimensional career paths. Drawing on a model from the past, we propose building a strong career culture based on the relational approach to CD. Implementing a relational strategy can save money and stretch resources, but it requires practitioners to take on new roles and responsibilities. We describe those roles and provide examples of three relational CD initiatives.

In an ironic twist, "change" has become a permanent part of our lives as well as our lexicon. Politicians, pundits, and company CEOs remind us that change is inevitable and that responding with acceptance, adaptation, and action is the path to success. In contemporary organizations, few areas have been rocked so thoroughly by change as the career development (CD) segment of HRD. As the old psychological contract of company loyalty and career commitment was replaced by short-term employer-employee alliances, CD was pushed to the background (Swanson & Holton, 2001). It is time to revive the relevance (Herr, 2001; McDonald & Hite, 2005) of CD in HRD. So how can CD best accept, adapt, and take action?

Most scholars and practitioners have accepted the fact that careers have changed. The long-term, move up the ladder, single organization career path has given way to career trajectories defined by Baruch (2004) as "multidirectional, dynamic and fluid" (p. 59). Careers, once "planned and managed" (Baruch, 2004, p. 59) within the static confines of a company, have been reclaimed by individuals and are now identified by terms like "boundaryless" and "protean." The former describes an autonomous career that spans multiple organizations, allowing flexibility and freedom to move to new opportunities at any time (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996). The latter is characterized as self-directed, focused on the needs and interests of the individual, instead of those of a company, and it may or may not entail changing employers (Hall, 2002).

These changes in the meaning and function of careers require an adaptive approach to CD. One that recognizes the relationship between an individual and the organization is not

destined to be long-term; but while it lasts, it should be mutually beneficial. Gilley, Eggland, and Gilley (2002) suggested that employers and employees "create a partnership that enhances employees' knowledge, skills, competencies, and attitudes required for their current and future job assignments" (p. 94). This recommendation signifies a subtle but important shift in the nature of CD. The focus becomes building skills for the employee's future, wherever it may be, while using those skills in the present for the good of the organization. Granrose and Baccili (2005) reinforced this perspective by emphasizing the importance of organizations recognizing and responding to employees' expectations that their work will help prepare them for future employment and/or accommodate development through non-traditional career paths. However, one recent study indicated many current CD offerings are falling short. A Society for Human Resource Management survey of nearly 1000 globally-based managerial level employees found that 41% were disappointed in their companies' CD, while an additional 30% expressed no opinion, which is hardly a rousing endorsement (Gurchiek, 2007). Among concerns noted, respondents reported organizational initiatives did not support their career aspirations, and CD was reserved for particular groups of employees. Given the importance of attracting and retaining a strong workforce, HRD practitioners need a plan of action that redefines CD to meet current needs. An effective plan entails building a career culture that extends beyond the boundaries of the organizational system.

A robust career culture acknowledges the individual nature of careers, supports multidimensional employee goals while strengthening the organization, and recognizes the need for innovative initiatives to supplement or supplant traditional CD activities. While some conventional options, like tuition reimbursement and mentoring, still hold promise if adapted appropriately, others like progression-based training programs are costly in terms of time and money and often no longer meet the needs of individuals or organizations. Central to creating a successful career culture is understanding the importance of building connections and being committed to fostering inter-relationships as key components of CD. This idea reflects a concept described over a decade ago but rarely put into practice. Hall (1996b) presented the framework for a "relational approach" (p. 2) to CD that focused on "mutuality and interdependence," advocating co-learning opportunities where the roles of "teacher" and "learner" are interchangeable (p. 3).

> The value of the relational perspective is that it sheds light on new ways to think about and promote development. Since we are always living and working in a relationship-rich environment, this approach has tremendous implications for the work of career practitioners. (Hall, 1996b, p. 3)

As a countermeasure to the uncertainty that was beginning to characterize careers in the mid-90s, the relational approach was proactive, pointing out that the monumental shift in how employees and employers perceived careers required an equally innovative transformation in CD. Kram (1996) described the relational approach as "less a process of differentiating oneself from others as it is understanding oneself as increasingly connected to others" (p. 140). Inherent in this style of CD is valuing a two-way flow of knowledge so that all parties learn and grow from the interaction (Kram, 1996). In retrospect, it appears to be a work ahead of its time. Instead of responding to the challenge of change, CD appeared to go dormant for several years.

A dozen years later, the basic tenets of the relational approach provide a foundation for building a strong career culture that expands the role of CD and of the career practitioner.

Career Development Initiatives

There are numerous ways to enact this relational approach to CD; however, we will focus on three that can increase connections both within and outside the organization's boundaries. The literature increasingly is recognizing the need to explore CD options that extend beyond the confines of the company's walls. Parker, Arthur, and Inkson (2004) write: "Smart organizations seeking to retain employee commitment and harness career-related energy can draw on external community knowledge, help employees to foster such community attachments and benefit from the support those communities provide to their members" (p. 509). Three strategies that help accomplish that goal are (a) developmental networks, (b) volunteerism, and (c) alternative forms of mentoring.

Developmental Networks

All types of employees – managers, professionals, and non-exempt workers – recognize the value of developing networks both within and outside their work environments (Forret & Sullivan, 2002; McDonald & Hite, 2005). Networks can assist employees in developing knowledge and skills, coping with work-life balance issues, and creating additional career strategies. Organizations can benefit from employees' increased knowledge and skills and from the "cross-fertilization of ideas and information across business units and departments" (Eby, Butts, & Lockwood, 2003, p. 704). Networks may vary in size and scope and may be characterized as informal or formal and as internal or external to the organization. As employees become more pressed for time, many are turning to e-networking as one informal, external means of staying in touch with their trade groups, professional associations, alumni groups, and other networking entities.

Volunteerism

This activity provides the opportunity for employees to interact with individuals outside the confines of their organizations by serving on boards, volunteering in non-profit organizations, or assisting with community events. Community organizations benefit by having access to employees' expertise, and employees often will gain additional knowledge and skills from their experiences. The Deloitte Volunteer IMPACT Survey (Deliotte U.S., 2008) concluded that while businesses agree that volunteering can increase employees' business and leadership skills, only 16% offer skills-based volunteer opportunities as a means of employee development and fewer still open these opportunities to all employees. The report suggested that as organizations are finding their training and development budgets shrinking, volunteerism provides a win-win situation for both the nonprofit as well as the organization providing the volunteers. We believe volunteerism also can expand employees' networks with individuals outside the organization.

Alternative Forms of Mentoring

Numerous benefits have been documented regarding the impact of mentoring on individuals' CD. However, often mentoring is available only to a select group of individuals. Alternative forms, such as peer mentoring, group mentoring, and e-mentoring, have the potential to increase the number of employees who can benefit from this important activity. For example, Booz Allen Hamilton uses mentoring circles, which involves experienced staff meeting in groups with less experienced employees to discuss career issues and strategies ("Holistic Approach," 2006). These alternative forms are advantageous for organizations wishing to increase the potential number and diversity of mentors and for those wanting to implement relatively cost efficient development initiatives.

HRD's Role

So how can HRD practitioners assist in developing this relational approach to CD? We believe practitioners have three important roles in this new career culture: educator, advocate/interventionist, and broker.

Educator

The educator role would appear to be a fairly traditional HRD role. However, the focus of education in this new era will be that of the informal educator. For example, there is a need to educate management on the benefits that can be derived from supporting boundary spanning CD activities. A career culture is more likely to evolve if upper management clearly understands the nature of careers today and embraces the use of varied initiatives to support employees' CD. HRD practitioners need to educate organizational leaders about the benefits that may be derived from this new perspective on CD. For example, one of the major recommendations coming from the Deloitte U.S. (2008) survey was that using volunteerism as a key developmental strategy "can be purposely leveraged to satisfy business needs."

Advocate/Interventionist

A career culture assumes that all employees will have access to developmental opportunities within the organization. Unfortunately, many companies limit CD to those in management, professional, or technical positions. HRD practitioners can and should advocate for expanding opportunities to all members of the organization. This may include recommending flextime or time off so individuals can be involved in activities such as networking and volunteerism. It could result in re-organizing the way work gets done so individuals can serve on task forces and cross-functional project teams. The HRD practitioner will need to go beyond simply advocating for these changes and to serve as an interventionist – acting as a change agent to create structures that will encourage and promote this new career culture.

Broker

As Hall (1996a) observed, "organizational career development as a practice is shifting from being a direct provider of career services to being a career resource and referral agent" (p.

319). This suggests that HRD practitioners need to (a) become knowledgeable regarding an array of boundary spanning means to develop careers, (b) develop resource banks, which will provide employees with information regarding external networking opportunities (e.g., listings of various professional and trade associations, special interest groups associated with the local Chamber of Commerce) and volunteer activities (e.g., community agencies, boards needing members, and community events), and (c) facilitate ways for employees to develop these connections. This can be done in a variety of ways – having ties to external networks and community leaders and agencies can help. Internally, HRD practitioners can assist employees in developing networking groups and encourage informal career discussions among employees.

Conclusion

We propose developing a strong career culture as the next phase of progressive CD within HRD. A career culture recognizes the pivotal role of CD in the strategic future of organizations. Designed to accommodate the needs of employee and employer, this culture fosters connective and collaborative opportunities as it expands the boundaries of CD to move in and out of organizations. While meeting the needs of individuals to work in complex, ever-changing environments, it also ensures a skilled workforce for the organization. Creating this relational-based, boundary spanning culture of careers will require new roles for the HRD practitioner and a renewed systemic commitment to CD. This essay outlines a plan of action to begin the process.

References

Arthur, M. B., & Rousseau, D. (1996). A new career lexicon for the 21st century. *The Academy of Management Executive, 10*(4), 28-39.

Baruch, Y. (2004). Transforming careers: From linear to multidirectional career paths: Organizational and individual perspectives. *Career Development International, 9*(1), 58-73.

Deloitte U.S. (2008). *2008 Executive summary: Deloitte volunteer IMPACT survey.* Retrieved May 22, 2008, from http://www.deloitte.com/dtt/article/0,1002,cid%3D203303,00.html.

Eby, L. T., Butts, M., & Lockwood, A. (2003). Predictors of success in the era of the boundaryless career. *Journal of Organizational Behavior, 24,* 689-708.

Forret, M. L., & Sullivan, S. E. (2002). A balanced scorecard approach to networking: A guide to successfully navigating career changes. *Organizational Dynamics, 31*(3), 245-258.

Gilley, J. W., Eggland, S. A., & Gilley, A. M. (2002). *Principles of human resource development.* Cambridge: Perseus Books.

Granrose, C. S., & Baccili, P. A. (2006). Do psychological contracts include boundaryless or protean careers? *Career Development International, 11*(2), 163-182.

Gurchiek, K. (2007, December). Career development gets failing grade from many workers. *HRMagazine,* 49-50.

Hall, D. T. (1996a). Implications: The new role of the career practitioner. In D. T. Hall & Associates (Eds.), *The career is dead—long live the career: A relational approach to careers* (pp. 314-336). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Hall, D. T. (1996b). Long live the career: A relational approach. In D. T. Hall & Associates (Eds.), *The career is dead—long live the career: A relational approach to careers* (pp. 1-12). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Hall, D. T. (2002). *Careers in and out of organizations* (*Foundations for organizational science series).* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Holistic approach to learning. (2006, October). *T + D, 60*(10), 28-31.

Herr, E. L. (2001). Career development and its practice: A historical perspective. *The Career Development Quarterly, 49*(3), 196-211.

Kram, K. (1996). A relational approach to career development. In D. T. Hall & Associates (Eds.), *The career is dead—long live the career: A relational approach to careers* (pp. 132-157). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

McDonald, K. S., & Hite, L. M. (2005). Reviving the relevance of career development in human resource development. *Human Resource Development Review, 4*(4), 418-439.

Parker, P., Arthur, M. B., & Inkson, K. (2004). Career communities: A preliminary exploration of member-defined career support structures. *Journal of Organizational Behavior, 25,* 489-514.

Swanson, R., & Holton, E. (2001). *Foundations of human resource development.* San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler.

Kimberly S. McDonald, Ed.D., is professor and chair of Organizational Leadership and Supervision at Indiana University-Purdue University Fort Wayne. Her research focus is on career development issues, ethics in HRD, and work experiences of hourly employees. Prior to joining the university, she worked in training and development for service organizations. E-mail contact: mcdonalk@ipfw.edu

Linda M. Hite, Ph.D., is professor and director of the graduate program in Organizational Leadership and Supervision at Indiana University-Purdue University Fort Wayne. Her research focus is on workforce diversity, career development of women of color, and work experiences of hourly employees. Prior to joining the university, she worked in academic administration and in corporate training and development. E-mail contact: hitel@ipfw.edu