

Defining International Human Resource Development: A Proposal

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From the beginning of the use of the term, there have been struggles over the meaning of human resource development (HRD). In recent years, there has been increased attention to the field's definition. This paper moves this exploration one more step to an exploration of the dilemma of defining international and cross-national HRD. A beginning definition is offered, not as a definitive answer but to facilitate ongoing discussion in the dialogue on HRD definitions.

Keywords: Definition, International HRD, Cross-national HRD

Human Resource Development (HRD) was first proposed as a term, it appears, in 1964 by Harbison and Myers. Since then, several fields (most notably, organization development and training and development) have come together under this nomenclature (McLagan, 1989), both as a field of practice as well as an academic field or discipline. Much of the published literature on the definition of the field has been focused in the west (originally, in the U.S. (Weinberger, 1998), and, increasingly, in Europe). More recently, there have been efforts to define the growing field of HRD from a broader perspective (McLean & McLean, 2001), and efforts have been undertaken to explore the emerging field of National HRD (Lynham, Paprock, & Cunningham, 2006; McLean, Osman-Gani, & Cho, 2004).

Much less effort, however, has gone in to exploring what, in the current age of globalization (Friedman, 2005), has become critical for the field—definition of international or cross-national HRD. There has certainly been a substantial body of literature, many of which will be reviewed in the literature review, focusing on the practice of HRD in an international or cross-national context and the development of foundational concepts and theories related to international/cross-national HRD. However, we have been unable to find any efforts at defining the field in this context.

There are those who argue that providing a definition for HRD is either not possible or not desirable (Lee, 2001). Others have argued strongly for one definition (either focusing on performance, as with Swanson, 1995, or learning, as with Watkins, 1991). It is the case that the field has not reached consensus on a number of its basic issues, such as identity, central locus or purpose, boundary, philosophical and theoretical underpinnings, relationship between HRD and HRM, and disciplinary nature. As Dilworth (2003) argued, although the quest for the essence of HRD is intensifying, at this time, no single point of view on HRD definition or HRD framework is predominant. This lack of agreement was underscored in Ruona (2000), whereby identified leaders in the field could not agree on their understanding, philosophical underpinnings, and the values and identity of HRD. Some have even argued that HRD appears to be inwardly directed and without substantial impact, and that failing to acknowledge some significant challenges to the future of HRD will further marginalize HRD or cause its collapse as a field (Short, Bing, & Kehrhahn, 2003; Ruona, Lynham, & Chermack, 2003). The question, however, is whether such consensus is harmful, and thus detrimental, or helpful, and thus essential, for the field. Is this lack of definitional consensus one of those challenges that could lead to such a collapse?

The authors of this paper do not agree on the answer to this question. Wang believes that the lack of consensus is a reflection of the immaturity of the field. He believes that efforts must be made to move to a consensual definition in order to continue to build and develop the field. McLean, on the other hand, believes that it is the dialogue that is important, not coming to a consensus. As dialogue continues, creative and breakthrough understandings of the field will emerge—concepts that are much more difficult when the emphasis is on developing consensus. Where we do agree, as authors, and what makes this paper possible, is the need for putting forward a definition of international or cross-national HRD in order to forward the dialogue—either for the sake of the dialogue alone (McLean) or for the purpose of moving toward consensus (Wang).

Statement of the Problem

Articles continue to be written, and need to be written, about defining the broad field of HRD, especially in a global context, and national HRD (NHRD). In spite of this assertion, Woodall (2006) concluded that

HRD has moved beyond describing itself as an *emergent* field: scholars are not so preoccupied in defining the boundaries of our intellectual pursuit....However,...we have not yet arrived at a consensus on the *scope* of our field of inquiry, or on the range of *theoretical* frameworks and *methods of inquiry* that we employ. (p. 153)

The thrust of this paper is not about providing new definitions in either global or national contexts, though we will review the work done in these areas, but only as a backdrop to providing a definition for international/cross-national HRD—as part of the expanding scope and theoretical frameworks observed by Woodall (2006).

As stated by Woodall (2005),

HRD scholarship now has to confront the challenges of cross-cultural analysis experienced earlier by other scholars from various social science and management disciplines. We face an important choice: do we take well-established theories, developed and tested mainly in the USA, and then apply them to the analysis of empirical evidence gathered in other countries? Or, do we sometimes need to start afresh, grounding our process of theorization in specific cultural context or even drawing upon theories and concepts developed in other management and social science disciplines? (p. 399)

While speaking to the broader context of research that explores concepts and theories of the field in a cross-cultural context, it is likewise important to look at a definition of HRD that may not fit in the context of a specific culture, or in a specific national environment, but, rather, relates to how we understand the field when it is applied in an international or cross-national context.

So, the question for this paper is, How might international or cross-national HRD be defined, as differentiated from general HRD or national HRD? This question was answered through a review of literature. First, all four AHRD journals were reviewed from their inception. This was followed by a review of electronic articles identified electronically through Google. The University of Minnesota on-line journal review process was also searched. Hard copies of journals in the holdings of the University of Minnesota related to HRD, HRM, and International Business were reviewed. Finally, the on-line book catalog of the University of Minnesota was used to identify meaningful books. On-line bookstores (such as Amazon and Barnes & Nobles) were also searched, and then the identified books were ordered through inter-library loan for review. The majority of the literature identified emerged from the review of the AHRD journals.

Past Attempts at Defining HRD and its Evolution

As already indicated, there is no consensus as to how HRD should be defined. In fact, Mankin (2001) concluded that past efforts of the HRD profession to define its identity and establish its boundaries are full of contention.

HRD has been defined traditionally in the context of individuals, work teams or work processes, and organizations (McLean, Bartlett, & Cho, 2003). For a long time, the field has ascribed the term, HRD, to Nadler in 1969 (Nadler & Nadler, 1989), and this took a solely individual perspective, focusing on training, education and development (Nadler & Wiggs, 1986), and organization development was not included. Nadler defined HRD as “organized learning experiences provided by employers within a specific period of time to bring about the possibility of performance improvement and /or personal growth” (Nadler & Nadler, 1989, p. 6). It was not until the recent rediscovery of Harbison and Myers (1964) that the record was set straight about what now appears to be the first use of the term, HRD. Harbison and Myers used the term in what today would be ascribed to the human capital school (Becker, 1983).

The HRD field of study was initially promoted by the American Society for Training and Development (ASTD), though this organization has not acknowledged the shifting understanding of HRD by incorporating it into its name. Further, it has reverted to a narrow view of HRD by focusing its most recent competency studies on what it terms “workplace learning” or “workplace learning and performance” (e.g., Bernthal, Coteryahn, Davis, Naughton, Rothwell, & Wellins, 2004). Many practitioner organizations, many modeled after ASTD, are emerging around the world.

HRD was further fostered, especially in its academic and scholarly advancement, by the Academy of Human Resource Development (AHRD) (McGoldrick, Stewart, & Watson, 2001a), and, internationally, by such organizations as the University Forum for HRD (in the UK and, slowly, more internationally), the Indian AHRD, and the Korean AHRD. But the existence of these organizations has not solved the boundary problem. Practitioners are faced with decisions about whether to affiliate with ASTD or with SHRM (Society for Human Resource Management), ISPI (International Society for Performance Improvement), ODN (Organization Development

Network), ODI (The Organization Development Institute), and so on. Academics are faced with making decisions about affiliating primarily with AHRD or UFHRD, or with AOM (Academy of Management), SIOP (Society for Industrial and Organizational Psychology), or even AERA (American Educational Research Association). And these are only those that are primarily U.S.A. based. Adding a broader organizational perspective would add dozens and dozens of other appropriate professional organizations. The boundary problem is clearly not limited to HRD but is faced by many professional disciplines. None of these organizations, to the knowledge of the authors, has undertaken to provide a definition of HRD.

Weinberger (1998) conducted what appears to be the first extensive examination of HRD theoretical domains and some 18 previous definitions. While identifying various perspectives, another conclusion she reached was that the definitions all came from a U.S. perspective and basically constrained HRD within organizations. Egan (2002) made a similar contribution and discovery when he presented an extensive list of definitions of organization development (which most in HRD accept as part of HRD, but which few in OD see as part of HRD), again, with all definitions coming from U.S. sources. Both studies, of course, were limited in their conclusions, as is the present paper, by their inability to access non-English literature, or English literature published outside of the U.S. but not available to them.

A prominent study that helped to expand the understanding of HRD, ironically, was sponsored by ASTD. McLagan (1989) postulated a much larger scope for HRD by defining it as “the integrated use of training and development, organization development, and career development to improve individual, group, and organizational effectiveness” (p. 7). Watkins (1991) supported this expansive understanding of the field by defining HRD as a field that fosters the long-term, work-related learning capacity at individual, group and organizational levels, including but not limited to organization development, career development, and training and development—the same areas as identified by McLagan (1989).

Swanson’s (1995) definition of HRD was “a process of developing and/or unleashing human expertise through organization development and personnel training and development for the purpose of improving performance” (p. 208). Swanson (2001) also argued that the three critical application areas of the HRD discipline are human resource management, career development, and quality improvement. In the UK, according to McGoldrick, Stewart, and Watson (2001c), the process of defining HRD by researchers and practitioners has been frustrating, elusive, and confusing; it is apparently lacking boundaries and parameters and is like a child of the explosion of HRM literature in the 1980s and 1990s (McGoldrick, Stewart, & Watson, 2001c).

Donovan and Marsick (2000) pointed to the increasing application and incorporation of other fields of study into the common understanding of HRD, including organizational leadership, organizational values, workforce development (Holton & Naquin, 2002; Jacobs, 2000) at the societal level, and labor economics. A recent definition proposed by Dilworth (2003) suggested that subfields, such as strategic change management, integration of learning processes, knowledge management, career development, healthy and productive workplaces, insourcing and outsourcing of training, team building, leadership development, and application of technologies to HRD, should all be subsumed within the HRD discipline; but the definition still did not extend beyond an organizational focus.

Meanwhile, recent HRD research has expanded the scope of HRD into areas that have not been traditionally considered to be within the domain of HRD (McGoldrick, Stewart, & Watson, 2001b). While some question whether the concept named HRD has grown beyond its original concerns about employees’ learning in organizations and propose a replacement for the term, HRD (Walton, 2003), most scholars seem to welcome the expanding boundaries of HRD.

After a comprehensive review of literature on the origins and historical influence on HRD, Alagaraja and Dooley (2003) stated that the earliest development of the HRD field emerged out of the Judeo-Christian traditions. Budhwani (2006) also pointed to the influence of early Islam to the development and understanding of HRD. The contributions from Western culture to the growth of the field became significant at a much later point in time. The current HRD framework has been mainly nurtured in the USA. But a USA perspective alone cannot represent the entire field of HRD (McLean & McLean, 2001). So, it is necessary to make HRD a more globally accepted and applied field by drawing on perspectives from different cultures.

This is, in fact, what was done by McLean and McLean (2001):

Human resource development is any process or activity that, either initially or over the long term, has the potential to develop adults’ work-based knowledge, expertise, productivity, and satisfaction, whether for personal or group/team gain, or for the benefit of an organization, community, nation or, ultimately, the whole of humanity. (p. 322)

This definition was derived from definitions from many countries around the world and is global-oriented and comprehensive and has been broadly cited. While touching on six levels of HRD activity (individual, group/team, organization, community, nation, and global), there are still areas that it does not touch—trans-organizational,

religious, regional, military, and cross-national, and perhaps others, though the catch-all phrase, “all of humanity,” encompasses everything!

There are other problems with this definition. First, it incorporates several terms that, themselves, require definition, especially “community” and “national.” It is also not clear about what it omits. Is the field well-served when the definition becomes so large that it includes everything. The authors also have concerns about the use of “adult” in the definition. As articulated by Budhwani, Wee, and McLean (2004), child labor is a fact of life, probably in every nation in the world. Should children, then, not be included in the definition? Another phrase that remains troublesome is “work-based.” As NHRD develops around the world, many nations are including education, health, safety, and other factors in their understanding of NHRD (McLean, Bartlett, & Cho, 1983).

The authors of this definition (McLean & McLean, 2001) espoused HRD and its definition as an ambiguous concept. As indicated earlier, some find this to be a strength of the definition, while others see it as a limitation, failing to lead to a unifying HRD framework. However, this definition did provide some direction from which we might now be able to theorize about international HRD (IHRD) and to provide a starting point for a definition.

There are many perspectives from which HRD could be viewed, beyond the more traditional HRD organizationally bounded definitions. The in-print debate between McLean (1998, 1999) and Swanson (1999) over the foundational fields contributing to HRD compared Swanson’s “three-legged stool” of economics, psychology, and systems thinking with McLean’s multiple-disciplinary “octopus” or “centipede.” While affirming the importance of Swanson’s three foundational areas, he argued that a much broader view of contributory fields must be taken.

One approach that is receiving increasing attention is societal development (e.g., McLean, Kuo, Budhwani, & Yamnill, 2006), combining contributions from many disciplines, including social work, applied psychology, policy studies, education, philanthropy, religion, and many others. Other perspectives include personal development, overcoming oppression (a Marxist or critical perspective), an ethical and moral perspective (e.g., Corporate Social Responsibility), and so on.

We also affirm with Swanson (1995, 1999, 2001) and Torraco (2001) that a dominant perspective for HRD, traditionally, and perhaps why the organizational perspective is so dominant, is the economic perspective. In fact, the earliest definition of HRD appears to have been developed by two economists, Harbison and Myers (1964), who defined HRD as

the process of increasing the knowledge, the skills, and the capacities of all the people in a society. In economic terms, it could be described as the accumulation of human capital and its effective investment in the development of an economy. In political terms, human resource development prepares people for adult participation in political processes, particularly as citizens in a democracy. From the social and cultural points of view, the development of human resources helps people to lead fuller and richer lives, less bound by tradition. In short, the processes of human resource development unlock the door to modernization. (p. 2)

Examples could well be provided from several other fields underscoring their importance in our understanding of HRD. With this understanding, we now turn to the task of defining IHRD. In this process, it is critical that we include a broad range of fields affecting international or cross-national HRD, including economics, psychology, and systems thinking, but also other perspectives such as social development, social efficiency, national productivity, national socio-economic development, global competitive advantage, and others, in the disciplinary domains of IHRD.

International HRD: Definition and Discussion

Economic globalization and transnational corporations have had a significant impact on the field of HRD (Yaw, McGovern, & Budhwar, 2000), providing the impetus for the need of a definition of IHRD. Over the past two decades, continuously intensifying globalization has demanded more internationalized HRD study and practice. But what is international HRD? While the term is frequently found in the literature, it is usually not defined, and, when it is, the definition is vague.

One of the major barriers in creating a definition of IHRD is that HRD has evolved differently in different nations. Further, as Hansen and Brooks (1994) found, HRD practitioners from different nations use culturally-based perceptions and attitudes to define their work and its effectiveness that often varies from U.S.-based HRD definitions. As cultural and social contexts vary leading to varied HRD practices, HRD as a discipline needs to develop a globally accepted definition for international HRD to accommodate the extensive amount of cross-national HRD work that is being done by transnational corporations, transnational non-government organizations, and transnational political entities. Thus, while individual companies working in one nation are free to develop their own understanding of HRD, and while nations work at developing an understanding of national HRD, it becomes

critical for organizations that work across nations to define international HRD to accommodate common themes that relate to cross-national or transnational HRD activities.

Peng, Peterson, and Shyi (1991) proposed a general lens through which to define international HRD; their definition, however, focused on HRD only in organizations, though with efforts to avoid confining the definition to a specific culture or country. By integrating pertinent literature, Peterson (1997) defined international HRD in three categories: HRD in a culture other than the USA; intercultural or transnational HRD between two or more countries; and general cross-cultural HRD, such as HRD in an international joint venture.

These definitions have two drawbacks: 1) they are still U.S.-based and consider HRD activities in non-USA cultures as international HRD; and 2) they consider HRD only in business organizations, ignoring other major organizations or entities.

From the UK, Metcalfe and Rees (2005) attempted to map out the terrain of IHRD theory and activity by drawing on international HRM (IHRM), development economics, and development sociology literature. They proposed that international HRD in the global arena be categorized under three headings: global HRD, comparative HRD, and national HRD. They then proposed a definition for IHRD that improves on that offered above:

IHRD is a broad term that concerns process that addresses the formulation and practice of HRD systems, practices, and policies at the global, societal, and organizational level. It can concern itself with how governments and international organizations develop and nurture international managers and how they develop global HRD systems; it can incorporate comparative analyses of HRD approaches across nations and also how societies develop national HRD policies. (p. 455).

Whether an HRD activity is based on the US (or any other one) culture or not should not be a criterion for defining international HRD. And such a definition should focus broadly on the full range of theoretical foundations that influence IHRD, working across multiple organizational types and entities. Finally, a broad range of stakeholders also need to be addressed in the definition, including, minimally, government entities, non-profit and non-governmental global organizations, transnational corporations, and individuals.

The major stakeholders for international HRD are described briefly in this paragraph. The first is local, regional, and national governments that partner with other governmental entities outside of their country, controlling transnational workforce flows through policies on immigration, transnational work permits, licensing, human rights, environmental concerns, and so on, and that deal with transnational learning activities, and talent and skills acquisitions. The second is non-profit and non-governmental transnational organizations, including such organizations as the UN (United Nations), World Bank, IMF (International Monetary Fund), ILO (International Labour Organization), and OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development), all of which deal with human resource development issues across nations, and non-governmental organizations, such the Red Cross/Red Crescent, and thousands of other sectarian and non-sectarian charitable organizations. The third is transnational for-profit organizations, including transnational corporations and joint ventures that cross national boundaries. This is the stakeholder that appears to attract the most attention currently in the literature. The fourth stakeholder group is individuals, which, while including those employed in the third category above, may also extend to self-sponsored study-abroad students who acquire expertise and capabilities under transnational settings, independent work contractors, and highly skilled talent seeking work and developmental opportunities unrestricted by national boundaries.

A major dilemma in moving forward with a definition of IHRD is that HRD is a developed discipline in a limited number of countries, though this situation is changing rapidly. While HRD is most widely established as an academic field in the USA and European countries, notably the UK, The Netherlands, and other countries, HRD has a long history academically in India, and it is developing rapidly in Korea, Thailand, and other countries. It is probably the case, however, that all countries across the world have HRD activities or practices, though HRD may not be fully developed in many countries as a discipline. The question, in this context, is whether a definition for IHRD can be developed when the stage of development of HRD varies widely in maturity from country to country, and when there is a broad range of willingness to accommodate cultural and national differences. Unfortunately, in the authors' views, too many countries, including our own, are so ethnocentric that the motives for IHRD may be self-serving rather than mutually advantageous.

Shaped in sophisticated historical, social, philosophical and cultural contexts, HRD practices in different countries are heavily influenced by their distinct characteristics, requiring that emergent HRD theories and concepts be indigenous to that culture (McLean, 1996). How, then, do entities that work across these cultural bounds, who understand HRD different, create a view of IHRD that serves everyone well? The situation is not as bleak as it might sound. Any country's HRD practices are comprised of two parts: the part that is universal and the part that is particular. If researchers focus on particularities, establishing a definition of IHRD will be overwhelming because of the complexity of HRD practice and the fact that supporting, foundational theories are contexts-bounded. If, on the

other hand, researchers focus on its universality, some aspects of HRD will be found to be generalizable across boundaries. For example, Cho and McLean (2004) drew some fruitful implications from many countries' national HRD experiences to generalize a set of emerging models for NHRD. In short, establishing a basic and universal IHRD theoretical framework is possible. The outcome of this paper is a beginning definition for scholars to consider as a first step in moving this conceptual development forward.

Based on all of the factors considered and presented in this paper, we now offer the following definition, not as a definitive statement, but, rather, inviting comment, feedback, and suggestions:

International HRD (also known, perhaps more appropriately, as cross-national HRD, transnational HRD, and global HRD) is a field of study and practice that focuses on for-profit, not-for-profit, and/or governmental entities, and individuals, cooperating in some form across national borders. The purpose of this interaction is systematically to tap existing human potential and intentionally shape work-based, community-based, society-based, culture-based, and politically-based expertise through multiple means for the purpose of improving cross-national relationships collaboratively across all involved entities through greater mutual understanding, improved individual and organizational performance, improved standards of living and quality of life, reduced conflict between entities and individuals, and any other criteria that would be deemed useful by the involved entities. IHRD is aspirational rather than realized and serves as a challenge for continuous efforts at improvement.

Conclusions and HRD Implications

Establishing a boundary or scope for HRD, and particularly IHRD, is controversial—with some arguing that a discipline must have well-established and accepted boundaries, while others argue that ambiguity is desirable in preventing a field from becoming stagnant. The authors of this paper each take one of these positions. Nevertheless, we are in agreement that having a definition, whether accepted or questioned, helps to build a dialogue that helps the field continue to develop.

Exploring IHRD provokes HRD scholars to pay more attention to larger issues affecting countries and may have a significant impact on the future of HRD. Cho and McLean (2004) argued that “no longer can academics hold to narrow definitions of HRD; it is clear that around the world...the concept of HRD is much broader with much greater impact than has been acknowledged in many academic programs and much of the literature of the field” (p. 390). This paper, and its accompanying definition of IHRD, proposes to articulate more clearly than has been done in the past an aspect of HRD that extends and expands our understanding of HRD.

Extensive effort has gone in to defining HRD at the individual, team, and organizational level. While less well explored, increasingly the scholarly literature is exploring community, local, regional, and national HRD. This paper moves to the third level, adding to the dialogue about IHRD. The literature thus views the HRD profession at three levels: individual and organizational (micro level), national (macro level), and international (global level). It is important for the field that dialogue continue at all three levels as the field seeks to become a mature discipline.

Recommendations for Future Research

We have just begun to scratch the service of the dilemmas faced in defining various aspects of HRD. We still do not have agreement on a basic definition of HRD, let alone NHRD, RHRD, Military HRD, and, now, International, Cross-Cultural, or Cross-National HRD. While we are not recommending that we need to have a standard definition for these terms, though that discussion needs to continue, we are recommending that the field and its scholars continue the exciting and ongoing debate related to its definitional characteristics. Further, as this paper has a cross-national team of authors, it is important for this dialogue to go on in a global context.

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