

The Competent Adult Educator/Human Resource Development (HRD) Practitioner

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Abstract

Of recent interest in the field of Human Resource Development (HRD)/Adult Education is the development of professional competence and learning within organisations. The paper reports on preliminary findings of an investigation of what Adult Educators/HRD practitioners perceive are the characteristics which relate to their effective performance. The research has the potential to contribute to workplace effectiveness and efficiency and also to give tertiary institutions better direction in terms of program refinement and offerings in adult education and human resource development.

OVERVIEW

The paper begins by describing the context and the problem with reference to HRD and competencies and reports on the current state of development of competencies for HRD practitioners/adult educators within Australia. The preliminary results of an investigation are then presented and an attempt made to compare these with some of the government's HRD functional competency frameworks (Competency Standards Body, 1992; Public Service Commission, 1992).

THE CONTEXT AND THE PROBLEM

Gurr's research, in 1981 analysed and described the role and jobs of HRD practitioners in the workplace. The outcome of his study was to facilitate development of education training and development programs. His findings concluded that 'the training and development field in Australia lacks conceptual role and status definition which are prerequisites to the attainment of full professional standing for human resource development practitioners' (cited in Geering 1984 p32). In 1992 Gurr's statement holds currency. HRD according to recent research (Sofo,1992) still lacks conceptual role and status definition.

Sofo's study (1992) researched the views held by HRD practitioners regarding their role and identifying their perception of HRD as an occupation and profession. The results confirmed the low status afforded to HRD/adult education within organisations.

In brief, the HRD practitioners interviewed expressed the following views. In regard to position, autonomy and power in their respective organisations they felt there was uncertainty and concern. Some comments included: 'frightened of being zapped by the department'; 'unsure of where I will work'; 'feel like a fly in orbit'; 'seen as a training officer and that's all'. Nadler & Nadler (1989) claim that the word trainer has perjorative overtones and is perceived as relating to low level activities in organisations. Practitioners also stated that there was no autonomy of

practice 'I am restrained in what I do'. Further, HRD departments in which the practitioners worked also played an insignificant role 'waiting for directions from above '.

Sofo's (1992) research revealed several important issues which have been supported by Jones (cited in Geering 1984). First, it seems that a standard job title for HRD (trainer or practitioner?) is still somewhat obscure. HRD seems to be still synonymous with training although it is gradually changing. This lack of clarity has not only resulted in confusion about what constitutes HRD, its role and activities, but has also led to the undervaluing and the under-employment of HRD practitioners within organisational systems. According to Cacioppe et.al. (1990). 'A professional field of Human Resource Development is rapidly emerging in Australia. The challenge it currently faces is transcending the old 'training image'. The group interviewed by Sofo found it difficult to view themselves as valued professionals within the organisation.

Moy (1991) in her attempt to define HRD states that a standard definition does not exist as 'differences appear between nations and over time' (p8). The trend in both the United States and Australia according to Moy has evolved from trainer to training and development personnel/practitioner (1970s early 80s) to HRD practitioner in the late 1980s. These changes in title have been indicators of a change in role emphasis.

The roles and activities of Human Resource Developers are unique to the field of HRD. Many practitioners, academics and students mistakenly perceive the roles identified in competency studies in Training and Development as being synonymous with the roles identified in HRD. It is essential to understand the difference in role focus between HRD and Training and Development. HRD includes individual, career and organisational development, while Training and Development simply means individual development (Gilley & Egglund 1989). Indeed, McLagan (1989) supported by other experts in the field, (Gilley & Egglund 1989, Attridge 1992) defines HRD as 'the intergrated use of training and development, organisational development, and careers development to improve individual, group and organisational effectiveness'. Gilley & Egglund (1989), state that 'what HRD does is to systematically develop the skills, knowledge and behaviour of people through training and development (focused on performance improvement related to current job), career development (focused on performance improvement related to future job assignments) and organisational development that results in both optimal utilisation of human potential and improved human performance, which together improves the efficiency of the organisation' (p12).

As an example of the roles in HRD, McLagan's (1989) study identified fifteen roles incorporated under four broad categories: Managers, Learning Specialists, Instructional Designers and Consultants. Nadler (1982) conceived a three part model:- Learning Specialist, Administrator and Consultant. An example of how roles are subdivided into subroles can be demonstrated thus. Under the broad category Manager the subroles included

evaluator, manager of training and development, marketer, program administrator and strategist.

Regardless of how the tasks are divided what is important are the broad categories within the field of HRD. These broad categories pinpoint the people who are to develop learning activities that bring about performance improvement and increased organisational efficiency. Further, when roles are clearly delineated organisations can create professional development programs for them which should result in enhanced competencies and skills for each role (Gilley & Egglund, 1989).

A number of exciting developments (eg tertiary level courses for HRD practitioners, the development and activity of professional bodies such as AITD, the internationalisation of the HRD scene in Australia through visiting consultants and HRD experts) have occurred in HRD to improve its image as a professional field. In contrast to the United States, Australia's Human Resource Development endeavour is just beginning to come into its own as a field of professional activity. HRD practitioners can still be considered 'gifted amateurs' (Walker cited in Geering 1984).

According to Cacioppe et.al. (1990) at present, organisations have a varied assortment of people involved with training and organisation development. 'In a number of organisations teachers, psychologists, personnel officers and gifted amateurs are responsible for staff development and training (p68). He states that 'In many cases people involved with staff development may have little or no academic education in areas such as design of training programs, adult learning, needs analysis techniques, facilitation skills, evaluation, or human resource planning' (p68). 'Currently, the level of competence and skill is so varied that organisations have little means other than the grapevine and their own experience with a consultant as a means of establishing effectiveness' (Cacioppe et.al. 1990, p68). Hence according to Cacioppe there is a growing recognition of an increased need to standardize the level of competencies of HRD practitioners.

As contrast, in the United States HRD is a recognised professional field. Professional organisations in this area are rapidly growing; publications are fast increasing with conferences and conventions strongly supported. Academic programmes are multiplying and masters and doctoral programmes are being aimed increasingly at human resource practitioners. Few HRD practitioners can find employment with less than a masters; and employers can demand doctorates with many years of experience (Spitzer 1980)

It is clear that HRD is a much broader field of endeavour than simply training. HRD practitioners need to be skilled to work across a wide range of activities including training and development, personnel management and organisational change. The search for a clear identity for HRD practitioners in terms of role definitions, concept clarification and professional practice guidelines has led to the important development of various competency models which in Australia are still at their infancy.

Another aspect of the problem is the notion of HRD competency and models used to conceptualise and deliver the competencies. The definition adopted by the Australian Department of the Arts and Administrative Services (DAS) is 'a competency is an underlying characteristic of a person which results in effective and /or superior performance in a job. The focus is not on tasks performed but a person's underlying abilities encompassing skills, knowledge and attributes (DAS 1992, Boyatzis 1982, Nowlen 1988).

According to Garrick and McDonald (1992) the contribution that competency models/standards can make to the workforce is great. When sensibly used they can help practitioners; talk in terms of what people are able to do; break away from using the notion of time spent acquiring knowledge or skills; better define what educators and trainers need to focus their training on. DAS expands on these notions by asserting that 'competencies provide the means for facilitating workplace reform in selection, training, career development and job and work design'. 'Competency based training provides a systematic method for improving organisational productivity and individual work satisfaction' (DAS, 1992)

The practical use of competency standards has potential to specify the competencies required for inclusion in job description for HRD practitioners; for recruitment and selection and for job definition. Competency standards can also be used as a basis for assessing and developing HRD professionals; to guide personal professional development; to guide those training trainers and assist in certification; to guide organisations in their concept of training and to make explicit the training role in other occupations (Garrick & McDonald, 1992).

Attridge, (1992) through the findings of the Public Service Commission's (PSC) 1990/91 HRD survey, convincingly illustrates the need for what he terms an HRD Strategic Model for the HRD Function. The PSC's HRD Survey has been the testing of agency practice against a series of underlying principles about what is good practice in HRD. 'Surprisingly, this does not seem to have been realised by some agencies' (p5). The survey found a lack of strategic focus in the HRD work of some agencies; that introduction of competency based training was underway but there was a long way to go; that evaluation, performance and management information systems were undervalued and underutilised; and that the average number of training days per participant across the Australian Public Service was about 5.8 days with the majority coming in well beneath that figure.

The lack of good HRD practice in some APS agencies led to the publication of a Strategic Model, 'so that these underlying principles of good practice should be made explicit' (Attridge 1992 p 5). The aims of the model were to provide a framework in which to plan and manage HRD activities enabling the link of HRD to a broader human resource management framework, increasing awareness of HRD as a key management tool and enabling assessment of the effectiveness of HRD within and across agencies (Attridge 1992 pp 8-9).

APS 2000 which the PSC published in 1989 raised this concern about the way the APS might manage the future. 'There is a danger that we will respond and react to the future solely in terms of the conceptual framework and models of yesterday and today, rather than today and tomorrow' (p3). 'HRD therefore needs to be forward looking; it needs to offer a plan unrestrained by the baggage of the past, for successfully managing the future'. (Attridge, 1992 p3).

According to Rothwell and Sredl (1987) there is a growing international perception among executives, managers and employees that if organisations are to meet the competitive challenges of the world marketplace more attention must be paid to all methods of improving organisational, group and individual performance. 'Competency studies can help to clarify the range of roles that can be played and the competencies and outputs associated with successful practice' (p71).

As McLagan has pointed out a competency study can be used by several groups. HRD management can use it for organisation design, staffing, staffing assessment and development, performance management, assurance of ethical conduct, career advising and organisation development. HRD professionals can use it in their own job design, performance management, career planning, professional development, documentation of HRD accomplishments, competency assessment, and ethics self-assessment. Academics can use it for course curricula, learner assessment, research agendas, student advising, and faculty management and development (Rothwell & Sredl, 1987 p72).

The University of Canberra has been undergoing significant change and refocusing since it became a University in 1990. It has a well established reputation built on twenty years of course accreditation and re-accreditation for providing high quality education for professional occupations and for applying the research skills of its staff to the problems of contemporary society. The university has embraced as its central mission the education of people for professional careers carried out in a professional way and has linked research to the concerns of the profession for which the university educated people and to its own educational programs.

Purpose AND SIGNIFICANCE of the study

The investigation sought to identify what adult educators/HRD practitioners within the Australian Capital Territory perceived to be the characteristics (competencies) which related to their effective performance. This information could be used for refining the five adult education/HRD awards offered through the Faculty of Education at the University of Canberra as well as for more clearly focusing the entrepreneurial work conducted through the Centre for HRD Studies within the Faculty.

The significance of the research can be understood at three different levels. First, there is the educational significance. Advancing the state

of the art by critically analysing new data, reinterpreting existing phenomena within the modern changed context and helping new understandings in the field may impact on the practice of education and training of HRD professionals. Professional competence can be lifted by the application of standards and especially by better focused education, development and training.

The second level of significance is at the policy level in relation to the Australian government improving professional competence of employees. The third level of significance relates to the University of Canberra research profile. The University's Educational Planning Advisory Group's (EPAG) report states: 'the University will have particular interest in the research problems of the professions for which it educates people' (EPAG Final Report, April, 1992, p.21). The research can contribute to this endeavour by helping to clarify the place and significance of professional competence and education within the HRD/Adult Education area.

An analysis of such HRD characteristics and perceptions may not only have the potential to contribute to organisational effectiveness and efficiency but can give tertiary institutions better direction in terms of program refinement and offerings in this discipline.

METHOD

Data collection included interviews, survey and six focus group meetings. Twelve personal interviews were conducted while the McLagan HRD survey attracted 80 respondents and 50 adult educators/HRD practitioners were involved in focus group meetings. This paper will report on the results of the focus group meetings only. All respondents were practitioners working in the Australian Capital Territory and about half of them were enrolled in one of the accredited award courses in Adult Education/HRD at the University of Canberra.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

In this section the findings of 6 focus group discussions are reported. The Public Service Commission (PSC) HRD competency framework consists of seven categories as shown in Table 1 and the units of competence in each category are directed at three different levels: category 1, part-time on-the-job training provider, category 2, full-time provider of HRD services and the third level category 3 includes people for whom the strategic management and evaluation of the HRD function is a major part of their job.

Eighty per cent of the participants in the focus groups were working in HRD/Adult education in the public sector while the others were either in private practice or in the private sector. About 25 per cent of participants were providing training in the workplace where that work was not a major part of their job. They played a key role in providing HRD services and in raising the levels of competency in the workplace and saw themselves as important providers of on-the-job training. About 60 per

cent were full-time in HRD and conducted structured training and facilitation dealing with groups as well as individuals and having considerable responsibility. The remaining 15 per cent had HRD management responsibilities as a major part of their job.

The following Table 1 shows the characteristics described by participants during the focus group discussions. They have been categorised on the basis of the Australian Public Service Commission (1992) HRD Practitioner Competencies. This model was developed on the basis of the National Training Board's Workplace Trainer Competencies (1992). Both these models did not allow for inclusion of attributes and attitudes as competencies.

The framework shown in Table 1 forms the basis for the Public Service HRD functional competency area. Functional competency areas are those which can be identified readily as discrete functions which complement and supplement the Australian Public Service (APS) integrated core competencies.

HRD is regarded as an important functional competency area. Each of the functional competencies is found in more than one government agency across a number of departments and usually involves a number of staff across the APS. Other examples of functional competencies include Financial Management and Procurement. A functional competency area may comprise a significant part of the total skills and knowledge required to perform a designated role or function such as a staff development officer. Conversely, it may also comprise only a relatively small part of the competencies required of a designated role or function such as a line manager with staff responsibilities.

Table 1: Adult Education/HRD Competencies for Outstanding Performance
(Based on Australian Public Service Commission HRD Competency Framework)

Identify Need	Design & Develop	Provide Consultancy Service	Schedule
Deliver & Evaluate	Market & Promote	Administer Training & HRD Respond	
to/ Influence Change			
Giving & receiving feedback			

Identify training needs Designing programs Entrepreneuring
 Inter-viewing
 Under-standing client need
 Client centred
 Negotiating
 Under-standing people
 Under-standing group processes
 Acquiring information
 Liaising
 Advising Expertise in teaching training
 Communi-cating
 Presenting make things memorable

Facilitating
 Listening
 Guiding
 Under-standing adult learning
 Over-correcting
 Observing perform-ance
 Analysing perform-ance
 Evaluating programs & learning
 Knowledge of learning styles
 Imple-menting learning activities Marketing
 Market ideas and concepts
 Winning support Managing/
 Adminis-tering
 Financing
 Organis-ing
 Resolving conflict
 Innovating
 Building relation-ships
 Inter-personal skills
 Role modelling
 Influencing
 Under-standing work environ-ment
 Under-standing gender

Table 1 indicates that most competencies fell under the three units of competency:

- i) Schedule, deliver and evaluate training/HRD function;
- ii) Provide consultancy services;
- iii) Respond to and influence change.

It is interesting that in the PSC HRD competency framework the second and third units of competency are applied only to people for whom the strategic management and evaluation of the HRD function is a major part of their job (that is category 3 practitioner). The results here indicate that these units of competency are equally relevant to categories 1 and 2 HRD practitioners since they comprised 85 per cent of focus group participants.

Table 2: Adult Education/HRD Competencies for Outstanding Performance

Specialist Knowledge & Skills

Underlying Attributes & Attitudes

computing self directing
 researching being common sensible
 observation skills being sincere
 motivating others willingness to listen
 interacting with people follow through ability

energising self and others believing in your own presentations
challenging skills monitor own authenticity
questioning skills being open
model building skills being flexible
coaching being adaptive so can be extrovert
counselling being sensitive to people and processes
having intellectual versatility being accepting
creativity & lateral thinking skills/flair empathic
scripting skills humour
leadership skills self discipline
empowerment skills integrity
focusing skills patience
learn quickly respecting
subject knowledge expertise achievement oriented
 enthusiastic, dynamic
 accepting challenges
 appropriate presence
 Attitude of 'I am still learning'
 self awareness
 responsible
 credible & effective

The characteristics listed in Table 2 were regarded as important for outstanding performance of HRD practitioners. These type of competencies generally are not included in the Australian HRD competency models (Public Service Commission, 1992; Competency Standards Body, 1992). However there are large government departments and agencies which have tended to ignore the Australian models and build their own models. For example the Department of Primary Industries and Energy listed three core units of competence in their draft HRD practitioner competencies: personal effectiveness, core knowledge and skills and HRD championing and influencing. The units of competence listed here reflect very closely the characteristics listed in Table 2. Their non-core HRD competencies included HRD diagnosis, HRD strategic development and HRD program design and management which are reflected and in the PSC framework as shown in the seven headings in Table 1.

A similar case exists with the Department of the Arts and Administrative Services which lists five focus competency areas linked to their strategic plan: maintain personal effectiveness, be customer's first choice, be a good employer, achieve financial success and be a responsible Australian enterprise. With both these organisations there has been a significant amount of devolution and increasingly managers are being required to fulfil the role of HRD practitioner as a critical part of their role function. The overall effect of this may be that in the long term the profile of HRD work within organisations will be more closely linked to the organisation's mission and strategy and consequently be more highly valued.

Discussions in focus groups centred around what is effective and outstanding performance and the particular characteristics which were

considered to contribute to superior performance. There was general agreement that not all characteristics were important for excellence that in fact basic skills were important for adequate performance but that it was attitudinal attributes which distinguished excellence from adequate or routine performance. Excellence was seen to be based on particular attitudes; rather than the particular skills it was the way in which the skills were implemented. Common perceptions expressed included that excellence involved taking responsibility for achieving outcomes, being enthusiastic, inspiring people and facilitating learners/workers to reflect critically, introducing new ideas and taking risks, having personal mastery, being centred and focused and bringing the best out of people and teams.

Table 3 shows the characteristics which focus group participants regarded as indispensable for outstanding performance as HRD practitioners. Note that the characteristics common to all 6 and all 5 focus groups are attitudinal and are not included in the PSC framework.

Table 3: Key Competencies for Outstanding Performance Common to Adult educators/HRD Practitioners (6 Focus Groups, N = 50)

Competencies Common to 6 Groups	Being adaptive and flexible
	Credibility, integrity, authenticity
Competencies Common to 5 Groups	Being accepting, sensitive, empathic
Competencies Common to 4 Groups	Subject knowledge expertise
	Facilitation, implementation skills
	Knowledge & skill of group dynamics
Competencies Common to 3 Groups	Motivation skills
	Enthusiasm, humour
	Understanding adult learning

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

The study reports on 6 focus group interviews of fifty adult educators/HRD practitioners on what they perceived to be the characteristics which contributed to their outstanding performance. Data collected were compared with the Australian government's HRD functional competency frameworks.

Eighty per cent of people worked in government and sixty per cent classified themselves as category 2 practitioner, that is full-time workers in adult education/HRD.

Preliminary results of this study seem to validate the Australian government's HRD competency frameworks. Generally the competencies listed paralleled the units of competence used in the government's frameworks such as identify need, design, develop, deliver, evaluate, consult, promote, influence.

However a number of aspects could be reworked more thoroughly. First, what is the place of underlying attributes and attitudes within a competency

framework? The data revealed that HRD practitioners perceived attitudes to constitute an indispensable part of the foundation of competency. Second, competencies within the two units of 'provide consultancy' and 'respond to, and influence change' featured largely in the focus groups' perceptions as applying to themselves. Eighty five per cent of respondents were category 1 and category 2 HRD practitioners. However the government's framework applied these units of competency only to category 3 practitioners, the managers.

Increasing the supply of appropriately skilled people takes time. Australia's achievement in this area falls short of best world practice (The National Training Board, 1991). Industry in Australia has been slow to recognise the importance of determining what it wants from those who provide training and has also underinvested in the training and development of its workforce, both off and on the job. The introduction of substantial change requires the acquisition of different competencies by HRD practitioners and involves the recognition of the competencies needed to achieve the desired outcomes. According to Cacioppe et al. (1990) more research is needed in the training and development field in Australia to establish information on HRD professionals and organisational practices.

This study supports this view. The lack of substantial Australian research has contributed to the inability to effectively consolidate the functions and practices of HRD (and their associated competencies) in Australia's private and public organisations. The only known government agencies who to date have specifically developed a competency model for the HRD function have been the Competency Standards Body (1992) and the Australian Public Service (Public Service Commission, 1992). In spite of the shortcomings this has helped to provide clarity of role and function for HRD across industry and the APS and provided a common language to use across industry, APS departments and amongst educational institutions within Australia about the HRD field and its curriculum needs.

There have been substantial signs that HRD is now clearly a dynamic field and it can be expected to remain so. However most organisations in Australia are still only at the discussion stage of a comprehensive approach to HRD and lack an integrated and guiding framework within which ongoing changes can be successfully managed (Cacioppe 1990, National Training Board 1991, Attridge 1992).

Many challenges lie ahead that require higher levels of professionalism and contribution of HRD. Competency models for HRD practice are designed to provide a common language and guidance to help meet those challenges and should be used by everyone who engages in, or influences HRD work. (McLagan, 1989)

Based on the findings of this study it is recommended that Research in the field of HRD competencies be increased. The call for more quality research

is based on several important reasons. First, competency models can be helpful in providing a language to use within and across organisations and amongst educational institutions within Australia about the HRD field and its curriculum needs. Second the uniformity in identification of competencies across studies may provide the basis of a generic set of HRD competencies for validation in an Australian context. Third, HRD is clearly a dynamic field requiring higher levels of professionalism and contribution from HRD practitioners. Further research into the training and organisational needs of the private and public sectors and the development of competency guidelines may help to firmly establish HRD as a credible and organisationally vital profession.

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