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HRD challenges faced in the post-global financial crisis period - insights from the UK

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HRD challenges faced in the post-global financial crisis period – insights from the UK

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Abstract

Purpose – The paper aims to report initial empirical research that examines UK employees' perceptions of the changing nature of work since the Global Financial Crisis (GFC) to consider how the financial context may have constrained HRD practice and more sustainable approaches.

Design/methodology/approach – Focus group research was facilitated through collective group discussion. Through template analysis of the findings, thematic analysis was undertaken to extend prior research. Themes used by Hassard *et al.* (2009) in terms of the changing nature of the workplace between 2000 and 2008, were used to provide new data on HRD realities.

Findings – Participants reported diminishing personal control over changes within the workplace and a cultural shift towards a harsher work climate. HRD was considered as silenced or absent and associated solely with low cost-based e-learning rather than acting in strategic role supporting sustainable business objectives.

Research limitations/implications – Whilst providing only indications from employee perceptions, the research identifies a weakened HRD function. The key contribution of this paper lies with empirical evidence of post-GFC constraints placed upon HRD strategies. It further identifies whether alternative development approaches, mediated by organisational learning capabilities, might emancipate UK HRD.

Social implications – This paper engenders a debate around the status of HRD within the UK organisations, further to the global financial crisis (GFC), where HRD might be viewed as at a juncture to argue a need for a shift from a financialised mode for people management towards one of greater people focus.

Originality/value – This research provides initial findings of the impact of the economic climate. It considers new approaches which might resolve expiring HRD through more sustainable practices.

Keywords Global financial crisis (GLC), Organisational learning capabilities, Weakened HRD

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

The workplace of the twenty-first century has radically changed (Brown *et al.*, 2009). The economic, financial and labour relations' context of the first decade of the twenty-first century has influenced UK human resource development (HRD), although the historical limitations of traditional development strategies previously have stripped technical skills within the UK (Thompson, 2003). UK organisations continue to face challenges, however, to adapt in the face of foreign competition and continuing technological advances. The need to differentiate organisations by the investment into innovative responses and employee expertise became an issue (Beausaert *et al.*, 2011; Gassman *et al.*, 2010). A background of the increasing "financialisation" of

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organisations, post-2000 (Thompson, 2003) and a continuing uncertain economic climate has left HRD in a weaker position. Instead of focussing upon the holistic development of human beings, HRD had been described as an instrument of corporate profit maximisation led by short-term financial outcomes (MacKenzie *et al.*, 2012).

A financialised environment, both before and after the global financial crisis (GFC), meant that by the end of the first decade of the new millennium, the position of HRD's influence upon organisational capabilities was limited (Alagaraja, 2013). Despite any observation that organisational innovation might drive performance to meet further challenges, or shifts, in the global market place, a failure to recognize key issues may have prevailed and undermined HRD's territory. The continuing UK and global economic situation has "backfooted" the position of HRD professionals. This potentially limited any priority for accepting more advantageous development interventions or even more sustainable approaches (Thompson, 2003), however virtuous. It is considered that there was a failure of those in the HRD profession to challenge critically their own assumptions and practices. As a result, HRD has continued as a weakened profession in UK's post-financial crisis and malfunctions by not addressing this situation (Gold and Bratton, 2014).

HRD has been criticised for disengaging with its roots in humanistic social science and its original concern for the well-being of individuals in organisations or the development of human potential (Ardichvili *et al.*, 2010). The *laissez-faire* approach of the financial and banking sector encouraged pseudo-ethical behaviours, which impacted upon HRD professionals as Human Capital Developers operating in a complex and compromised context (MacKenzie *et al.*, 2012). Regardless of whether operating environments mediate the corporate adoption of strategic HRD (Alagaraja, 2013), it has been argued that focus upon the linkages among organisational systems and policies is necessary. These should be embedded in the organisational architecture (Garavan, 2007). As a construct, organisational learning capabilities (OLC) can enable organisational learning potential and provide leverage towards resolving economic challenges (Camps and Luna-Arocas, 2012), thus enabling HRD to balance its duty towards human development alongside its concern for organisational effectiveness (Ardichvili, 2013).

Post-GFC – a new era for the UK?

It has been claimed that UK HRD professionals have spent time trying to save their "own jobs to the point that they may have failed to do their (HRD) job" (MacKenzie *et al.*, 2012) and failed to meet employee needs. Perceptions of HRD as a provider of training, rather than strategic partner, may have further prohibited it from making valuable contributions to the wider organisation through the workforce. As Wang *et al.* (2009) note, if HRD does not have a strategic role to play, then learning and performance becomes constrained. Despite that, during economic recession conditions, to stay in business, businesses must respond (Roche *et al.*, 2013). The organisational status quo should not be one of "silenced" HRD. By contrast, the questioning of managerial assumptions allows for the evolution of ethical, socially responsible human intellectual capital (MacKenzie *et al.*, 2012). Despite that HRD professionals may have failed to critically challenge the assumptions of HRD (Gold and Bratton, 2014; also see O'Donnell *et al.*, 2006), a dialogical development perspective might assure that a greater sustainable people focus prevails.

Evolving the organisation's culture by encapsulating dialogue building, which fosters trust and enhances implicit organisational knowledge, also encourages common aspirations and shared visions from multiple stakeholders within the organisation, whilst still questioning any historical stances, (Sprangel *et al.*, 2011). If the facilitation of any necessary future collaboration within the organisation is to succeed, inequalities in organisational power relations must be confronted. The need to build trust within the organisation through its environmentary management systems is necessity. The furthering of "workforce energy resources" (Halm, 2011) might then lead towards sustainable organisational survival (Sprangel *et al.*, 2011; Camps and Luna-Arocas, 2012) and provide a more proficient use of human capital (Halm, 2011). The embracing of alternative development stances to meet the "real" needs of workers needs further regard for the future. Tissen *et al.* (2010) further move from a changing environment debate by suggesting that simply there has been a shift in the employment relationship. Any "dis-connect" (Thompson, 2003) from a financialised human capital model (MacKenzie *et al.*, 2012) might leave further impotence for any weakened aspirations towards more virtuous HRD.

Problem statement and purpose

The problem lies with whether HRD has disengaged with its humanistic social science roots and its original ethical concerns for the well-being of individuals in organizations or for developing human potential (Ardichvili, 2013; MacKenzie *et al.*, 2012). Responses lie within the tensions for HRD professionals which appear to have led them towards the juncture, where UK HRD has found itself 'backfooted' (MacKenzie *et al.*, 2012).

The aim of the paper is to report initial research findings, which consider the possibility of HRD as a retracted role in the UK organisations. An examination of literature is furthered through the consideration of an empirical study to provide new data concerning HRD realities in the UK organisations from employee perceptions.

This paper seeks to make two contributions. First, it argues that an over-influence of the capitalistic importance of economic pressures, which seek to drive down costs, have limited HRD professionals' choices in terms of concern for people and the take up of new development initiatives (see later in example, Halm, 2011; Sprangel *et al.*, 2011; Wolf, 2011). It further explores whether HRD is "backfooted" or "silenced" within the UK by these capitalistic, managerialist stances towards people management (Klikauer, 2013). Second, it sets out to extend the prior work of Hassard *et al.* (2009), by reporting research collected with reference to Hassard *et al.*'s prior study. This paper sets out to examine gaps in terms of what is known currently about HRD reactions in response to the recognised need for more examples (O'Donnell *et al.*, 2006), by way of the investigation of the lived experiences of current workers.

Commencing this research, we identified that there was a dearth of empirical material regarding the pre-GFC period, (Marchington and Kynighou, 2012). Therefore, we considered Hassard *et al.*'s (2009) research, which reflects their study undertaken between 2000 and 2008. Whilst their research was not solely focussed upon HRD and its impact, Hassard *et al.* (2009), and earlier Hassard within McCann *et al.* (2004, 2008), observed work practices as emanating from capitalistic, managerialistic influences. They linked these to a dereliction of HRD in the support of workplace change. In the

absence of other longitudinal empirical sources, this was an important precursor to this research, where we attempt to progress the arguments surrounding the constraints faced upon the role of HRD after the GFC.

The objectives of the article are to:

- Identify how the financial context post-GFC has influenced employee perceptions of HRD's actions.
- Examine how the links between HRD and the current UK economic context, in terms of the potential contribution of sustainable development approaches, have been theorized.

Background – literature

To begin, it is perhaps useful to outline the position of Hassard *et al.*'s (2009) publication, which summarises their earlier published papers (McCann *et al.*, 2004, 2008 and Morris *et al.*, 2006, 2008) from their research. [This research was undertaken by their consideration of changes to work practice. It provides longitudinal findings.] Given the very little longitudinal empirical material available of post-GFC work practices at the time our research commenced in 2011, Hassard *et al.*'s work (2009) was used as an empirical predecessor for our studies. Hassard's team focussed upon the experiences of managers within three countries from 2000 to 2008, and included a study focused in the UK. They noted that there was substantial evidence of unpleasant and difficult working conditions emerging post-2000. Hassard *et al.* (2009) attributed this to short-term managerial thinking. Rather than evidence of support from HRD, Hassard *et al.* (2009) recognised that much of the organisational change enacted had led to work intensification, with an apparent decline of any influence, post-2000, from the HRD function to instigate any improvement in working practices (Hassard *et al.*, 2009).

The tactics of UK HRD professionals espousing their "strategic" business partner ideals might have widened prior power imbalances, or gaps, between employees and others within organisations (Ardichvili, 2013; MacKenzie *et al.*, 2012). Pursuing approaches, which promoted the position of HRD professionals, rather than the needs of the workforce, may have reinforced any inequalities of the position of employees (MacKenzie *et al.*, 2012). This reflects the diminished ability of HRD strategies to resolve challenges faced by organisations (Thompson, 2003). It appears that HRD professionals also failed to be clear that employees lack power to negotiate (Cullinane and Dundon, 2006), and power imbalances reflect consequences for workforce change (Ramirez *et al.*, 2007). Historically impotent HRD strategies then, given any capitalistic imperative towards increasing profit (Ardichvili, 2012, 2013; Ardichvili *et al.*, 2010, leave consequences in terms of the potentially weak negotiating position of employees (Cullinane and Dundon, 2006). In the face of corporate financialisation, this can translate into the employees' (people-focus) position as invisible (Thompson, 2003).

The training of HRD practitioners may have potentially constrained them from recognising any conflict between their role and their wider duties towards the organisation. The curriculum for professional training of HRD practitioners (for example, Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development – CIPD, UK professional society) has been recognized as limiting (Francis and Keegan, 2006; Rigg *et al.*, 2007; Lawless *et al.*, 2012). A critical perspective linked to socio-economic context within professional development is necessary (Gold and Bratton, 2014). In the face of economic

challenges or crisis (Wang *et al.*, 2009), HRD is of critical importance in supporting organisational strategic choices after all.

How then has HRD been theorised as providing support for organisational strategy?

It has been claimed that the nature of managing people and their development has become central to the strategic running of the organisation (Schuler and Jackson, 2005). Problems may have lain with limited appreciation of the social complexity of organisations (Singh and Mohanty, 2011). Traditional development approaches have failed to find divergent ways of observing the organisation or to facilitate reflective critical analysis. This has prevented [otherwise marginalized] critical ante-narratives from emerging. By promoting implicit organisational knowledge based within complex social relationships, however, developing OLCs encourage the promotion of healthy attitudes at the organisational core. These can be causally linked to competitive advantage practices and organisational survival (Camps and Luna-Arocas, 2012).

Within the UK, HRD aspirations towards High Performance Working (HPW), based within organisational knowledge, had held the prior focus of attention (Hassard *et al.*, 2009). HPW was espoused as a set of conceptual approaches (Butler *et al.*, 2004) as the collective use of HR bundles and "new" working practices (Wood and de Menezes, 2008). HPW has been argued as being mediated by OLCs (Camps and Luna-Arocas, 2012). Central to the burgeoning HPW was its limited consideration of the complexity of inter-organisational relationships. This led HPW ideology towards academic controversy (Hughes, 2008) where practices within the UK were driven by short-term financial goals (Keeble-Ramsay and Armitage, 2009).

The possible financialisation of organisations, given capitalistic management influences, had led to a "dis-connect" (Thompson, 2003) from people-focussed management. Any virtuous HRD intentions were circumvented by managerialistic strategies lacking focus upon people needs (Ardichvili, 2013). They might even have broken any prior "high road" "deals" towards a more people-focussed HRD (Thompson, 2003, 2011). Therefore, when faced with financial crisis, HRD professionals leading companies towards taking the "high road" through high performance initiatives might have prevented short-term thinking about people management. The potential for adoption of virtuous commitment-based HRD approaches (Halm, 2011; Sprangel *et al.*, 2011; Wolf, 2011) may have been constrained by any low-cost ("low road") organisational responses. Subsequently, low-cost responses limit the potential sustainability of aspiration (Thompson, 2011) or of social responsibility.

Employees have even been continuously confronted with changes in their workplaces. Learning provides coping mechanisms and the crystalisation of learning patterns, which are shaped by work, in terms of the employees' perceptions of the workplace, and communities of practice through socialisation (Govaerts and Baert, 2011). Alternative responses to difficult economic pressures might be tackled through development of the employees. A positive relationship between OLC and performance may be established (Camps and Luna-Arocas, 2012). OLC, based within the learning culture, which evolves through the exchange of knowledge, it is argued, will facilitate organisational survival and sustainable existence.

Adopting alternative approaches, therefore, which take a critical perspective by recognising the norms and power relations to provide more sustainable, holistic needs of

employees, may be necessary to resolve any crises faced (Wang *et al.*, 2009). The consideration of writings by Halm (2011), Sprangel *et al.* (2011) and Wolf (2011) may assist the illustration of any potential need to adopt alternative approaches.

Halm's (2011) Life Giving Workforce Design (LGWD) is presented as a "blueprint" for virtuous values within an open system, which aspires to generate energy-stimulating human capital to achieve organisational objectives (Rothwell and Stavros, 2011). Given the caveat of its own limited evidence in its application, LGWD gained some success around 2005. It was developed through grounded theory in a professional services organisation as an HRD initiative. Further, LGWD is built around the ideal of the liberation of the leadership to create a trusted and appreciative culture that supports organisations in transition. Authentic employee engagement and sustainable systems that draw from corresponding operational practices become contributory to this process. Thus, it is claimed that LGWD leads to superior performance and success (Halm, 2011). This relies upon a faith in the importance that a supportive climate can facilitate an enduring culture during times of change, through leadership approaches and operational systems, which gain authentic engagement from employees. LGWD embraces collaborative energy. Halm (2011) advocates that nurturing management practices, based upon participation and democratic principles, can stimulate the intellectual assets of the employees to meet organisational objectives. Halm (2011) claims that the model might be utilised across diverse industries and geographical regions. Whereas, low vitality, malevolent and autocratic leadership approaches (found in "low road" approaches) contrast by being destructive (Nyberga *et al.*, 2011).

LGWD might be likened to the foundations of the human relations school, yet the model of LGWD is claimed by Halm (2011) as having generated a body of knowledge that previously has not existed. Sprangel *et al* (2011, p. 39) also claim that development should move from a classical diagnostic perspective towards the dialogic. Sprangel *et al.*'s (2011) "employer branding" mode seeks to guide thinking through appreciated inquiry and positive organizational scholarship, alongside strategic thinking about strengths, opportunities, aspirations and results. Building trust allows social concerns to be on an equal footing to financial and environmental considerations. It progresses the need for an organisational environment which allows fundamental questions to be raised to challenge any cultural assumptions or "the taken for granted".

A further approach (couched in Lewin's, 1947 "freeze–unfreeze" change concepts) purports an upward "spiral of opportunity" that can be developed through organic interventions encouraging discourse and engagement (Wolf, 2011). These facilitate rapid transformation. Wolf (2011) claims that the current rapidity by which responses to change might be demanded mean that the power of relationships needs recognition. Organisational discourse constructs new dialogues which lead to a needed sense of organisational agility (Wolf, 2011). This agility might be achieved further by challenging any organisational "status quo", thus presenting a critical role for leadership to facilitate inquiry. Whilst developed in a hospital setting, Wolf (2011) claims that the "spiral of opportunity" results in organisational freedom, to act without "permission". This intervention claims to provide a framing for choices which facilitate a path of new possibilities. Wolf (2011) argues that, in the current climate, there is no time to "freeze frame" and stand still to facilitate change. Wolf (2011) claims collaborative, organic discourse provides a viable dialogical stance to shift from

financial concerns towards equality with people focus. Yet, this relies upon the organizational leadership to perceive merit, or need, for such shifts.

There continues to be an unavoidable dialectical tension between whether HRD serves economic capital or labour (O'Donnell *et al.*, 2006), however. The critical discourse around HRD needs to move from prior adolescent assumptions to a more mature stage, given that HRD emerges as a field, which serves many diverse purposes. Naïve interpretations of supportive environments may merely represent a dialectical trade off in terms of earlier tensions (O'Donnell *et al.*, 2006). Attention is needed to determine whether HRD is concerned with developing resources for the benefits of employees, and effective in creating positive cultures in the embedding of organisational norms, or merely party to a performance paradigm, where instrumental exploitation of employees drives performance. How these tensions are managed in contributing to the survival and growth of the employer, as opposed to the quality of employees' working lives, demands examination as to how HRD practitioners cope with such trade-offs (O'Donnell *et al.*, 2006). Given HRD's linkage to economic capital, if the foundations and legitimacy of HRD are managerialistic and economic, then what could be anticipated as the likely outcomes? It becomes imperative then that HRD researchers must advance the knowledge-creation process by challenging traditional research approaches (Ardichvili, 2013). Sustainable development can be attained only when there is a fair balance between the environmental, economic and social elements at the levels of the individual, the organisation and the society (Ardichvili, 2013). Equal consideration should be afforded to environmental, economic and social aspects of how organisational activities affect people's physical and mental health and well-being. Ethical business considers responsibility, not only to business customers or partners but also to the many stakeholders or wider society. From which consideration, ethical practice includes the morality of sustainability for all business processes, and this links to the need for sustainable development. Creating ethical business cultures through power configurations, resulting from interactions among individuals steadily rising under the weight of society HRD interventions and aimed at affecting ethical behaviour and culture, becomes key. By connecting with practices of unified actions focussed upon improving the consciousness for questions around power and power interrelationships within the organization, HRD can play an active role (Ardichvili, 2013).

HRD has become fixated upon performance and has lacked focus for developing a sustainable and responsible society (Ardichvili, 2012). By foregoing its role within organisational culture embedding sustainability through increasing awareness, developing skills and behaviour patterns, it becomes focussed solely upon perpetual economic expansion (Ardichvili, 2012). Whilst much of this may relate back to the professional development and organisational objectives placed upon HRD professionals, the tensions between economic capital and labour are exacerbated rather than enabling any shift from an expansionist towards a sustainability paradigm (Ardichvili, 2012). Possible contributions to sustainability, in terms of whether organisations responses may be mediated through OLC, means an exploration of the current responses of HRD is needed. It is from this perspective then that our research sought to consider evidence of the perceptions of the approaches of HRD.

The lens of Hassard *et al.*'s (2009), Morris *et al.* (2006, 2008) and McCann *et al.* (2004, 2008) work identifies HRD as potentially reduced to culture change programmes and coaching. This provided us a platform to carry out research to explore how HRD

professionals have addressed challenges of economic capital and labour. Our research project included wider research, rather than just the examination of the role of HRD reported here. By the repetition of their prior research themes of change, culture, communication and impact of information technology (IT), however, responses to these provided some initial findings from employees' perceptions. This allowed the deliberation of the role taken of HRD responses to the post-GFC economic climate.

Method

The objectives for this study were to gain insights from the lived work experiences of participants in 2011, reflecting upon their prior three experience in the workplace. Given the dearth of empirical studies, our investigation used Hassard *et al.*'s (2009) prior research to confirm existing constructs. It further provided a template for the focus group research. Hassard's work had been limited solely to researching managers' experiences. We extended this to incorporate the experiences of the wider workforce, given our recognition of the flaws of approaches, which fail to engage further with the context within which practices are enacted (Guest, 2011). Despite their impact upon the organisation, there has been an absence of employees' attitudes in research (as opposed to collecting the views of management) (Conway and Monks, 2009; Guest, 2011). Also to examine how participants interpreted the impact of the environmental context and role of HRD upon their work roles, as there are few studies, which take into account the importance of the role of employees' perceptions or the mediating roles they hold in terms of organisational practices (Kehoe and Wright, 2013). By extending the sample to the wider workforce, we attempted to gain a more inclusive representation of perspectives from the organisational community. Conway and Monks (2009) identify that not focussing upon employees fails to recognise their perspective. As the organisation provides the social platform within which interactions take place. This affects the level of cooperation and how human capital and social capital combine which affords the basis of human capability (Wright and McMahan, 2011).

Constraints of access did not allow for a repetition of the interview approach, previously used by Hassard *et al.*'s (2009) studies. However, it was considered that focus groups can be used to evaluate and develop further issues (Race *et al.*, 1994) that might not have been achieved through repeating one-to-one interviews. As researchers, we recognised, given the constraints of sample size and the nature of focus groups, that generalisability is limited. Because the study was to gain initial insights and be exploratory, generalisability was not an expectation for the study. Data allowed us to draw conclusions to make comparisons to Hassard *et al.*'s (2009) study. However, this inquiry was focussed solely in terms of perceptions of HRD practices.

The choice to use focus groups was decided to obtain co-constructed views and shared experiences, as they facilitate an organised and collective group activity discussion (Kitzinger, 1994, 1995; Powell *et al.*, 1996; Goss and Leinbach, 1996). Given this study was founded within a social constructionist epistemology for the co-creation of knowledge (Kreuger, 1988) allowed the transcription of a rich discourse, which might not be captured by other survey methods. It was considered that utilising participatory focus groups enabled free discussions to take place which was important to an exploratory study and for which we followed an interpretivist enquiry. Focus groups allowed for the facilitation of obtaining several perspectives, founded upon group

interaction, and the re-formulating of views in terms of why an issue is salient (Kitzinger, 1994, 1995; Powell *et al.*, 1996).

The number of participants in Hassard *et al.*'s (2009) UK studies engaged around 100 participants. Our focus group study represented 10 groups, of 7-10 participants, providing a comparable sample. Based upon prior invitations to participate, selected by way of a convenience sample, this comprised an equal number of middle managers and front-line employees. There was an equal mix of public sector employees, as compared to private sector participants. The focus groups were interviewed for 1 hour which was initiated by way of a set of pre-defined questions provided on a stimulus sheet. These were derived from posing thematic questions, taken from those used in Hassard's studies, to facilitate discourse and to allow groups to consider their working environment since 2008. Each group was provided with notepaper so they could record and submit their own summary commentaries. These commentaries were then thematically coded, (King, 1998) into initial categories. Focussed stimulus questions were used to facilitate the positioning of themes into bins (Miles and Huberman, 1984).

Results and analyses

Analysis of the data took place using Hassard *et al.*'s (2009) study themes to guide data, that is, change, culture change, use of IT and communication. Then by re-visiting the data through open coding, themes were revisited to facilitate adjustment to the prior coding selected, enabling high-order codes to facilitate focus upon core concepts and to allow the final emergence of themes from the data through this inductive process using template analysis (King, 1998). The use of the template assisted triangulation of the data and its validity by allowing comparison through the themes and the data collected. By adjusting the template as new themes emerged from the focus groups, for example, aspects of control, facilitated a flexible approach to tailor the codes. To allow assumptions to be compared (Glaser and Strauss, 1967), data were organised in these major categories labelled as themes (Creswell, 2003).

It was found that there was no apparent difference in views of participants, in terms of whether they were engaged within the public or private sector. It would seem then that any question of possible differences of sectors was either not an issue for the participants or was not evidenced by the method used. This was not a matter of focus for this research. Thus, this would require additional research if there was any query of the difference between the sectors.

Through analysis of the narrative discourses, however, it appears that the focus group participants largely replicated findings from Hassard *et al.*'s (2009) prior observations of a lack of HRD support for work practices within the post-2000 context as follows.

Change

Thematic analysis of discussions of change (as expressed within interaction notes) observed that intense organisational change was raised within group discussions repeatedly. Alongside this, the culture theme was evidenced by way of a predomination of references to "new practices". These were expressed as perceptions of leading to a more financially focussed culture, for example, by increasing the length of working days and the nature of workload. As opposed to any intentions of the organizations, we considered that the contextual discourse from the focus groups represented the

perceptions of workers expressed as their co-construction of reality. Excerpts from the discussions are used to illustrate the related discourse around identified themes.

Comments from one focus group noted that:

"[…] re-structuring and financial changes had now happened each year since the crisis and as a result we [workers] were concerned about our job security […]".

Some of the change discussed represented restructuring. To clarify, participants identified more constrained job roles, attracting greater accountability and financial focus. They noted greater levels of control over their daily activities.

One participant noted change as increased control, reciting that:

> […] the organisation had changed its policy on absence in the workplace for medical appointments. The organisation historically had allowed workers "time off" for medical appointments on the proviso they could support the time, through evidence of doctor's note etc., and there was no need to "make up" the time otherwise – the relationship with their work output was relaxed. Since 2008, however, the organisation has required the workers to take either annual leave for medical appointments or call in a full day of sick leave, (thereby limiting pay for medical appointments to UK statutory sick pay rules) […] increasing bureaucratic control but with less concern for the welfare of the workforce […] [substituted by] greater concern for financial controls […].

Culture change

Groups discussed the change to the working environment with observations that it felt "tougher" and identified this as a "shock culture". Whilst comments might be depicted as representing differing management styles within differing organisations, participants generally debated a lack of control over, or participation within, change agendas. Participants discussed that change was dictated solely by way of portraying economic reasons for change, that changes could not be avoided and were inevitable. The role of the employees was to accept the change and not be consulted.

Three of the groups echoed each other by suggesting that not only did employees need to accept any changes announced or instigated within their organisations but that the current approach was that they should neither question nor challenge any changes being invoked. This suggests a perceived cultural change, insofar as employees experienced a shift in their prior expectations of the employee role in the negotiating or notification of workplace change.

Communication

The focus groups suggested a "parade of restructuring"; they explained this as a process conducted through a series of emails and meetings, in some cases, supported by letters or company-wide newsletters. The general approach was that the employees were being notified without interaction.

One participant recounted:

"[…] Much of the change had been communicated by email using an impersonal manner. Rumours often pre-empted the formal communications received by email […]".

Where the restructuring was communicated, then it appears to be limited to impersonal email messages. The theme this illustration seemingly reinforces lies within perceptions for employee "voice within the organisation". They appear to express limited ability to negotiate or hold equality of power in their positions within the workforce (Thompson, 2003, 2011) and essentially the absence of HRD in terms of their

holistic well-being as opposed to a preoccupation with performance outcomes (Ardichvili, 2013; MacKenzie *et al.*, 2012).

Communication featured also within the discussion of theme "impact of IT". Here, the problems of communication were linked to the management of change. All the focus groups recognised that there had been change that could be linked to changes in technology. For example, the use of SMART phones were attributed to a subsequent change in culture, which was expressed as a "catch you out" culture, i.e. if you missed a call, text or email. This was viewed as a potential move towards a more pressurised culture.

Another focus group raised the issue of technological change and the lack of communication when websites or software was changed, given minimal or no HRD support. The group discussed that limited advice, as to either the nature of the technological change or when it would take place, had been an issue. They associated HRD interventions as being solely focussed around the changing use of technology as opposed to the supporting or meeting of wider workforce needs. There is a tension imposed through prioritizing the meeting of organizational outcomes or performance needs over the human needs of those employed (MacKenzie *et al.*, 2012).

Use of IT

Groups related an increased amount of e-learning as replacing other developmental modes. One group discussed a "sheep dip" approach, where all the staff had to sit through video-based learning by deadline dates. The group attributed the length of the training – 90 minutes or more – as being difficult for workers to schedule within their work duties. This resulted in employees watching the material in their own time. This group discussed being penalised by not having completed assigned training. They identified a requirement for the production of a "completion certificate" for each piece of training, regardless of whether the person had already been experienced or previously trained. They illustrated their points by agreeing that some training, for example, data protection policies, had been delivered in a uniform way. This resulted in employees sitting through "repeat training" but without any negotiation or prior consultation in terms of relevance to the individual.

As a further example, they noted that, if there be was a change in a procedure, a new "video-based" training software was produced. It would then be mandatory for all workers to listen to or watch the full length of the recording or video in order to show "compliance". This was required regardless of individual level of experience with the prior or proposed procedure.

Whilst we noted that we could not detect any differences reported between the lived experiences discussed from those working in the public sector and those in the private sector, one focus group contained managers and employees from the same private sector organisation. The organisation had been particularly financially successful since the GFC. They discussed having benefitted commercially from contracts being outsourced by the public sector.

They recognised an entrepreneurial approach driving the company and lively interactive communication, but suggested that the constant cost cutting of the public sector contracts, that they supplied to, meant that the company had to look to changing work practices to meet these contractual obligations. One of the participant noted to the others that:

> […] the entrepreneurial spirit and economic success of our business inspired the workforce to take on additional activities as the work force were "happy to have a job" in areas where low skills were required […]. and employment appeared to be sustainable in this successful organisation. The management of the organisation have taken a very facilitative approach and the workforce felt "part of the team" and […] increased the contractural base of the business through successful levels of customer service […].

As such, this quote might recognise a description of "employer branding"-based stances (Thompson, 2011) as opposed to more dialogical approaches (for example as advocated by Sprangel *et al.*, 2011 or Wolf, 2011). This illustration, from the focus group discourse, equally might be considered to link to LGWD (Halm, 2011), whose study centred on an organisation, which was growing with a liberated leadership base encouraging employee engagement. Yet, the economic basis of their contractual relationships was impacted by the changing spectre for "low-cost" responses. This suggests that the organisational response to changing contractual obligations was one of constraining "high road" developmental aspirations to satisfy the tension of economic capital versus the needs of labour (O'Donnell *et al.*, 2006; MacKenzie *et al.*, 2012).

In summary, the themes that emerged through the focus group discussions appear to evidence an evolution towards more limiting organisational environments being perceived by the workforce. Whilst lesser HRD support as a response to economic recession might be unsurprising, this study sought to consider whether the experiences reported provided confirmation of "low-road" responses (in line with Thompson's, 2003 earlier predictions). These results might then reinforce Thompson's (2011) conceptualising of higher HRD aspirations being dropped and support a focus upon short-term financial outcomes rather than well-being (Ardichvili, 2013; MacKenzie *et al.*, 2012).

The focus group discussion evidence does not clarify, however, whether "high road" ideals were ever in place within the employees's organisation. The employees perceived less than favourable changes in terms of culture, the impact of IT and worsening communication modes, despite increased technological options. Group discussions depicted HRD as an instigator of task led technological training by impoverished learning modes rather than recognise any communication improvement. This potentially suggested a less favourable position of HRD adopted in terms of their duty to wider societal development (Ardichvili, 2012, 2013). The focus groups perhaps suggest the manner with which change was managed, and the communication of change, by way of its financial focus, did not reflect any importance placed upon the employees' relationships within their workplace. It might be observed that such constraints impact upon any potential value of developing organisational learning capabilities (OLC) (Camps and Luna-Arocas, 2012) to redress economic challenges.

The study did not seek to test the effectiveness of new development approaches outlined within this paper (Halm, 2011; Sprangel *et al.*, 2011; Wolf, 2011). The empirical results provide only employee views of the current working environment, post 2008, to determine whether employees perceived that the current workplace climate reflected practices of open discourse, or liberated leadership approaches. The evidence appears to suggest, that the workforce's perceptions of the working environment is of discourse moving towards being more closed, with greater autocratic leadership and a culture of compliance. The study confirms perceptions of a shift towards developmental initiatives focussed upon organisational effectiveness which are detrimental to the

wider, holistic development of human beings (Ardichvili, 2013). It recognises then that the underlying issues might lie not with whether any new stance might resolve or remedy current organisational responses to economic conditions, but whether there was any evidence to suggest that participants' organisations were likely to seek to engage with new approaches, however virtuous, in future. There was no substantive evidence from participant perceptions to suggest that organisations might.

Conclusions

The aim of the paper was to report initial insights by the consideration of the position of HRD in a retracted role in the UK organisations. The study recognises the potential challenges for HRD resulting from a potential climate of "financialised" organisations, which may have "backfooted" strategic HRD aspirations (Alagaraja, 2013; Ardichvili, 2012, 2013; CIPD, 2012; Garavan, 2007; Hassard *et al.*, 2009; MacKenzie *et al.*, 2012; Thompson, 2003, 2011) and complex environment within which HRD professionals find themselves compromised by their assumptions (O'Donnell *et al.*, 2006).

The focus groups conducted appear to evidence perceptions of a harsher UK working environment for employees (as consistent with Hassard *et al.*'s, 2009 observations). We are not clear whether the climate has worsened at any greater rate post-2008. It could be anticipated that the UK working conditions might be perceived less favourable during a period of economic adjustment (Roche *et al.*, 2013). The perceptions of our focus group participants reflect this. Thompson (2003) projected that a conceptual "dis-connect" away from people-focussed approaches may have driven the responses of organisations, where they have had to abandon prior agreements or people-based intentions. The criticisms of the financial bottom line (MacKenzie *et al.*, 2012) prevailing over alternative choices for HRD, might be drawn from the insights provided through our focus groups. This could then provide evidence of the failure of HRD practitioners to act in terms of meeting labour needs (O'Donnell *et al.*, 2006; MacKenzie *et al.*, 2012; Thompson, 2003, 2011).

Our findings illustrate constraints for potential in the adoption of dialogical development approaches (Halm, 2011; Sprangel *et al.*, 2011; Wolf, 2011), however. We tender that there was a pocket of evidence from participants, identified as those who worked within the profitable concern, where newer organic, dialogical approaches (such as those identified by Halm, 2011; Sprangel *et al.*, 2011; Wolf, 2011) might be embraced. Possibly the question of whether positive changes in the economic climate might ease, or even encourage, attention towards the adoption of these types of approach could be posed. It might be reflected that Ireland's recessionary experiences have been where pre-recessionary practices prevail once economic growth is established (Roche *et al.*, 2013). When recession declines, and the UK's economic growth triumphs and if organisations are more profitable, then more virtuous aspirations and stances may be sought potentially (Roche *et al.*, 2013).

HRD practitioners need to present arguments towards a more favourable, sustainable people-focussed approach to counter any financially foscussed position, however (Ardichvili, 2013). Growth or not, if the status quo is retained, HRD remains silenced by the tension of choosing economic capital over labour needs (O'Donnell *et al.*, 2006; MacKenzie *et al.*, 2012). The re-balancing by the introduction of new dialogical, organic development approaches (Halm, 2011; Wolf, 2011; Sprangel *et al.*, 2011) might redress holistic human development needs and further allow skill enhancement

alongside people focus. OLC may be then embedded (Camps and Luna-Arocas, 2012). However, if "backfooted" in terms of roles by which HRD professionals are recruited (MacKenzie *et al.*, 2012; O'Donnell *et al.*, 2006), it will become critical for HRD managers to challenge their position of being silenced. More research is needed then to explore this.

The study sought to examine debates about the economic climate and the positioning of HRD within the current UK neo-liberal context, further of responses to the recessionary conditions. New initiatives have been purported as revolutionary (Halm, 2011; Sprangel *et al.*, 2011; Wolf, 2011) and can be aligned to being more sustainable well-being centred, equally facilitating OLCs to assist with economic challenges. By reviewing the context within which they might be applied potentially facilitates a lens that considers not whether approaches are valid but possible. This demands more research again, however (O'Donnell *et al.*, 2006). Future research might further capitalise on expiring HRD perspectives.

The discussions surrounding OLC (Camps and Luna-Arocas, 2012) provide links to the potential of interfacing with the core organisational knowledge. OLC potentially provides a platform, which might progress the position of HRD as a function in the next decade of the twenty-first century practice. It also provides approaches to meet the economic and competitive challenges perceived by the UK organisations, which otherwise may prove untenable as continuing to undermine better practices (Thompson, 2003, 2011). However, the focus group here solely provides insights which might facilitate further debate on the relevance of these ideas.

Despite tensions towards their meeting the needs of organisational outcomes (Roche *et al.*, 2013), the nature of the dynamics of the wider economic environment and climate perhaps might be the greatest determinant of whether HRD professionals will ever adopt dialogical positions. Our focus groups contribute towards the recognition of current employee perceptions of the "invisible" role of HRD. From which, HRD was presented as just the supplier of technological training. Our focus group findings appear to be consistent with Hassard *et al.*'s (2009) review that of the constrained impact of HRD in terms of changes in working practices. We suggest that the challenge for HRD remains with the changing nature of capitalistic responses in managing organisations. This has led HRD to a corner where it is placed solely an onlooker of a short-term financially focussed directed strategies (Thompson, 2011). It remains unclear whether the position of HRD has become entrenched. We suggest at a minimum then that HRD professionals raise awareness of these arguments. To consider HRD's vulnerability in positioning itself as a Cinderella to financial bottom-line direction by questioning any assumptions professionals hold, it might further its responsibility relative to ethical practice and sustainability (Ardichvili, 2013; Gold and Bratton, 2014). In so doing, we attempt, through the review of dialogical development approaches, to raise HRD professionals' consciousness (Halm, 2011; Sprangel *et al.*, 2011; and Wolf, 2011).

A different research approach, aimed at seeking to compare differences between the private and public sector responses to the economic climate, might also reveal any possible differences of the sector. We recognise that further research into this topic is (both intended and) required and for any generalisability to be established, this would be in terms of a larger sample. The limitation of the size of our study, as a set of initial findings, has been noted. However, we see this study as a starting point. As an update on the evidence surrounding the current HRD practices reported from a UK research

sample, we attempt to recognise here the implications and challenges for HRD that these initial findings may uncover.

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