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Professional development of HR practitioners – a phenomenographic study

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is an investigation into the experiences of professional development of human resource (HR) practitioners in the North of Scotland, and the use of non-formal learning in that development.

Design/methodology/approach – In-depth semi-structured interviews from a purposively selected sample of HR practitioners were conducted. Data from these interviews was analysed on a phenomenographic basis, to discover the qualitatively different ways in which HR practitioners describe, experience, understand and analyse their professional development and the use of non-formal learning in that development.

Findings – What emerged from the analysis were two sets of categories of description, one for each of the phenomena. An outcome space for each of the phenomena emerged, illustrating the hierarchical relationship within each set of categories of description as well as the dimensions of variation relating to the phenomena. These outcome spaces represent the collective experience of the practitioners on the subjects of professional development and non-formal learning.

Research limitations/implications – Sample size and the specific geographical area are acknowledged as limitations. Another factor which may be considered a limitation is that the author's position as an HR lecturer with a keen interest in the subject could lead to this being considered an "insider" study. All these factors are acknowledged. These have been mitigated against by the careful preparation undertaken during the research process which resulted from the author's awareness of these limitations.

Originality/value – This study has given a voice to the HR practitioners in the North of Scotland with regard to their experiences and attitudes towards their professional development and the role of non-formal learning in that development. This study gives employers, other practitioners and professional bodies an opportunity to learn from the practitioners themselves as to how they can help practitioners in terms of their development.

Keywords Phenomenography, Professional development, HR practitioners, Non-formal learning

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

As a former human resource (HR) practitioner and currently a lecturer in HR with a strong commitment to professional development, I was alarmed to learn that participation in continuing professional development (CPD) by professionals, including HR practitioners, appears to be erratic (Friedman and Phillips, 2001; Farmer and Campbell, 1997). This led me to speculate about how, if at all, they keep their professional knowledge, personal skills and competencies up to date. Is there a lack of awareness of the necessity to keep up to date (Cullen *et al.*, 2002; Evans, 2009a, 2009b)? This must surely raise questions about the quality of service that HR practitioners, the

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focus of this study, deliver, and the resultant effect on the status of the profession as a whole (Reed, 2008).

Traditionally, CPD experiences involve, almost exclusively, formal experiences, and current thinking is now moving towards more practice-based experiences (Gold *et al.*, 2007). Non-formal learning is one way of participating in CPD. Non-formal learning mechanisms are generally accessible to everyone, with new technology emphasising this. As the General Medical Council identified "doctors should also recognise when unexpected opportunities for CPD arise […] a range of different activities will normally be suitable" (GMC, 2003). This reflects how CPD is broader than conventional courses – it should include formal as well as less formal learning experiences (Eraut, 2001). Research on professional development has mainly focused on the role of formal mechanisms (Chivers, 2006) and how this is, or could be, used to keep professionals up to date with less attention being given to the role of informal learning (Cheetham and Chivers, 2001). Consequently, the research described in this paper, which is part of a wider doctoral study, emerged from these factors. The aim of this research is therefore:

"To explore the ways in which HR practitioners in the North of Scotland experience professional development and the role of non-formal learning in that development".

This research takes the form of an exploratory study and while the focus of this study is HR, I believe that the findings will be relevant to a wide range of contemporary professions. I anticipate that the outcomes of this research will be, firstly, to identify the various ways in which HR practitioners experience their "professional development". Secondly, to provide a guide for the professional development practice of HR practitioners, and as a result, improve the quality of HR provision, and, finally, to identify a variety of different and accessible ways of participating in that professional development and how they can be embedded in everyday practice.

Literature review

Continuing professional development

It is useful at this stage to define the term CPD. It is, according to the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD), "the conscious updating of a professional's knowledge and the improvement of personal competence throughout their working life" (CIPD, 1994). While this is all very well, to be an effective HR practitioner in today's working environment, an individual will have to develop a wide and diverse range of skills, not only knowledge. They will need to develop the "whole person" (CIPD, 2007; Conlon, 2004; Shaw *et al.*, 1999; Collin *et al.*, 2012). It is, therefore, important to acknowledge the depth and breadth of the components of CPD. The elements of CPD encompass morals, knowledge, skills, attitudes, behaviours and characteristics (Bailey, 2013). This seems to concur with Evans' (2009a, 2009b) view of professional development in which, she maintains, there are three components. The first, functional development, is concerned with professional performance; second, attitudinal development is concerned with work-related attitudes; and third, intellectual development, which is concerned with work-related knowledge and understanding (Evans, 2009a, 2009b). Shaw *et al.* (1999) also concur when they identify that increasingly professionals cannot be concerned solely with the functional elements of the job, there is a much broader range expected of professionals today, including intellectual, vocational and behavioural skills and competences.

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This wider and more diverse range of competences required by contemporary professionals, including HR, has resulted from the fast-changing, competitive occupational climate of the twenty-first-century workplace (Friedman and Woodhead, 2008). The changes can be categorised as social, regulatory, work structure and technological (PARN, 2000). Change, and the speed at which it occurs, means that it is increasingly more challenging for a professional to maintain their knowledge, skills and competences (PARN, 2000; Gold *et al.*, 2007). Those professionals who do not actively keep themselves up to date will not simply stand still, they will be left behind (Smith, 2003; Wisniewski and McMahon, 2005). The situation has prompted Guest (2002) to advise workers today that in terms of professional development, they need to be both a team player while at the same time consider themselves to be self-employed consultants.

There has been a tendency in the past for individuals to consider their pre-service education and professional educational achievements to be the "sum total of their professional development" (Murphy *et al.*, 2006, p. 365), although Cheetham and Chivers (2001) discourage this notion when they highlight that practitioners need to realise that the greatest amount of professional development will take place during their working lives, not during pre-service education. Marsick and Volpe (1999) and Reardon (2004) highlight that it is becoming apparent that the more traditional forms of development, such as only pre-service training, are no longer suitable or relevant.

All these changes in the occupational climate have prompted a number of writers to suggest that the criteria for defining professions are out of date, and need to be updated (Eraut, 1994; Abbott, 1991; Locke, 2004). Similarly, Evans (2008) proposes that the traditional criteria for defining professions are outmoded and have become obsolete. Not only have the criteria become outmoded, but Swailes' (2003) view is that the current occupational climate of increased legislation, uncertainty, market pressures and shifting demands has led to the emergence of many "new professions".

There has been much debate as to whether or not HR– "those involved in the management and development of people" (CIPD, 2010) – is one of the new professions (Gold and Bratton, 2003; Gilmore *et al.*, 2005). It is accepted that HR could not be classified as one of the higher professions, e.g. medicine (Gold and Bratton, 2003). HR has evolved from its welfarist, paternalistic roots (CIPD, 2012) of the late nineteenth century to the tactical and strategic position held by HR practitioners today (Kew and Stredwick, 2010). This position is reflected in that there are a number of policy areas which directly affect the HR practitioner on a daily basis. "Public policy", stresses the CIPD (2009), directly affects the HR practitioner via employment legislation and regulatory codes of practice. It is generally accepted that there are four areas of HR work – resourcing, learning and development, relations and reward – these areas cover all aspects of the management and development of people role of HR (Armstrong, 2009). Employment legislation is constantly changing and being updated – and legislation exists relating to all the above functions. The HR practitioner needs to have specialist knowledge of the legislation and must ensure the constant updating of this knowledge (Gold and Bratton, 2003). Not only that but the often ambiguous (Evans, 1999; Boselie *et al.*, 2009) position of HR (Harrison, 2011) within organisations today requires them to include business knowledge and other transferable skills, such as problem-solving, negotiation and communication, required of the contemporary professional (Cheetham and Chivers, 1998). This ambiguity stems from the contradiction between employees being perceived as "people" while at the same time being perceived as "resources" to be

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utilised efficiently. This requires the contemporary HR practitioner to develop the skills required to successfully implement "team work and individual accountability, the need for change and the need for continuity, long-term vision and short-term performance management" (Evans, 1999, p. 326). Not only does the HR practitioner require the skills to implement, for example, a change initiative, but the skills to know whether, at a given time, it is a change initiative which is required or whether maintaining continuity is most appropriate. Balancing the needs of the employees and the organisation can present a dilemma for the contemporary practitioner which, in itself, requires development of particular skills (Evans, 1999), such as those identified above. All of this emphasises the importance of their ongoing professional development. This then must surely position HR as a contender for the term "new profession" (Swailes, 2003; Ardagh, 2007).

Evans (2008) suggests that a more appropriate evaluation for contemporary professions is in terms of a commitment to professional development. Their professional status should be on the basis of their "developmentalism", or, in other words, practitioners' propensity for participating in, and commitment to, professional development. This is likely to be evidenced by practitioners continually striving to improve their practice (Cantillon and Jones, 1999) by way of extending the wide range of elements required for their particular profession. This notion of defining professions in terms of practitioners' propensity to keep up to date in terms of the broad range of elements seems to be reflected by other writers on this subject (Abbott, 1991; Locke, 2004) and emphasises the need for, in this case HR professionals, professional development.

The term development, highlight the CIPD:

> […] implies a longer-term or broader process of learning and training – acquiring skills or knowledge by a range of different means such as coaching, formal and informal learning interventions, education or planned experience (Egan, 2013, p. 2).

This being the case, the next area to clarify is how that the various elements might be updated. Schoenfeld (1999, p. 6) seemed to encapsulate how this might be done in his statement "[…] coming to understand things and developing increased capacities to do what one wants or needs to do […]". This is, in fact, Schoenfeld's definition of learning. The CIPD's definition of learning is similar and is "a self-directed, work-based process that leads to increased adaptive potential" (Egan, 2013, p. 1). In the context of this study, then, CPD is concerned with updating the practitioner's knowledge and skills, and the way this is likely to be achieved is through learning on the part of the HR practitioner. Factors which affect the learning in this context are, firstly, that the practitioners are all adults and, secondly, are currently practising in HR. The next thing to consider is how this learning might occur. Learning can, potentially, happen anywhere, in the workplace, at home; at a social event; during interaction with colleagues, managers, peers or mentors; or at a formal course. Learning can be planned or unplanned and can occur in a formal or non-formal way (Marsick and Watkins, 1997). In addition, according to Cheetham and Chivers (2005), learning need not be a solitary process.Hase and Kenyon (2000, 2007) and Kenyon and Hase (2001) suggest that in the contemporary occupational climate, the way in which practitioners learn needs to be considered, and they suggest that a heutagogical approach is necessary to ensure that their professional development is relevant and that they maximise the benefit from all learning events. At

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the heart of this approach lies the skill of knowing *how* to learn, and is relevant to both formal and non-formal learning events. Collaborative learning is another feature of the heutagogical approach (Hase and Kenyon, 2000, 2007).

Many professional associations devise initiatives to support their members in terms of professional development (Sadler-Smith and Badger, 1998) as do employers (Collin *et al.*, 2012). Professions comprise individual practitioners and as such needs will vary from individual to individual, so while it is this continuous practice of professional development that can keep practitioners up to date, it must be considered on an individual basis (Evans, 2009). This is another reason why individuals must take some responsibility for their learning (Collin *et al.*, 2012).

The CIPD, unlike other professional associations, does not identify a specific number of hours or events which need to be undertaken for the purpose of professional development; they encourage what appears to be a "self -managed process" for their members (CIPD, 2007). Harrison (2011) identifies that this may pose problems for HR practitioners compared to the more traditional professions. A more structured and rigorous approach to CPD strategy by the CIPD may be preferable to support practitioners throughout their career (Harrison, 2011).

Non-formal learning

As has already been identified, work today, and HR work is no exception, is changing rapidly and the knowledge and skills individuals actually need to do their job are changing – a consequence of this is that formal development is often quickly out of date, so other methods need to be considered (Eraut *et al.*, 1997; Cunningham and Hillier, 2013). Eraut (2000) makes the point that non-formal learning should not be considered inferior to formal learning. In fact, Marsick and Watkins (1990) in a 1990 study suggested that only 20 per cent of what employees learn comes from formal training events. This being the case, non-formal learning is an obvious avenue worth exploring in terms of professional development (Bailey, 2011).

There is often confusion or misunderstanding in relation to the term "informal learning" because there are a number of writers who use the term "non-formal" learning. Eraut (2000) prefers the term "non-formal" because there appears to be less colloquial connotations. The term "non-formal learning" is used in this study, as it seems to be the most appropriate in this context.

Much has been written about "formal learning", which is generally considered to be "centred upon teaching or instruction and is located within specialist educational institutions" (Colley *et al.*, 2003, p. 5). Collin *et al.* (2012) highlight the emphasis on formal learning in the special CPD issue of the *International Journal of Training and Development* but do acknowledge the multidimensional nature of CPD. Surely then it is worth exploring how more non-formal learning experiences can be used to harness more of the knowledge and skills required of a contemporary HR practitioner? Although a number of writers have identified and described what is meant by "informal or incidental learning events or experiences", little research has been carried out on their role in professional development, particularly relating to the HR profession. Colley *et al.* (2003) attempt to clarify by highlighting that it (informal learning) generally occurs out with, what is traditionally identified as, an educational institution. It is, Cunningham and Hillier (2013, p. 3) intimate, "almost everything that a person does". Marsick and Watkins (1997) identify that informal learning is a method of learning that takes place

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during daily activities, and can occur subconsciously. Not only that, but because, as Chivers (2011) identifies, employees can learn in the course of their daily activities, using a wide variety of non-formal mechanisms (Cheetham and Chivers, 2001), their normal productivity need not be interrupted by this learning. This is, arguably, extremely important in the current economic climate. There has been, though, a good deal of criticism towards non-formal learning. Marsick and Volpe (1999) identify its haphazardness in terms of minimal planning as being an issue. Digenti (2000) identifies that the often lack of recording and measuring what has been learned in the course of non-formal interventions is problematic. Not only that, but Fulford (2012) cautions that failure to record learning derived from an event can have the effect of de-valuing that learning. If individuals do not review and follow-up what they have learned, it will be quickly forgotten (Mathews (2013), which seems to highlight the value of recording learning. Recording of CPD is an emotive issue, as many practitioners from a variety of professions see the recording of CPD as a chore (Donyai *et al.*, 2010).

Two research questions emerged from this literature review. Firstly, what are the qualitatively different ways HR practitioners in the North of Scotland experience professional development? Secondly, what are the experiences of HR practitioners in the North of Scotland in the use of non-formal learning mechanisms in that professional development?

Method

Phenomenography is a research approach, rather than a method, which aims at describing, analysing and understanding experiences (Richardson, 1999; Ireland *et al.*, 2009; Marton, 1986), or in other words "the various ways of conceiving a phenomenon" (Micari *et al.*, 2007, p. 460) and seems to be appropriate because it is an empirical research approach which was designed in the 1970s in Sweden by Ference Marton (Anden *et al.*, 2009) to answer pedagogical questions (Orgill, 2002); more specifically, to understand why some students are better learners than others. Dortins (2002) identifies that the purpose of phenomenographic research has been to illustrate the various ways in which learners capture their learning, thus contributing to the body of knowledge relating to teaching and learning, and as this study is fundamentally about learning, would seem an appropriate choice. The word has Greek roots and is derived from the words, appearance and description. This approach, therefore, comprises a description of appearances (Orgill, 2002). In this study, I intend to discover the qualitatively different ways – because I believe from my own experience and anecdotal evidence, there will be differences – in the ways in which people (HR practitioners) understand, experience and think about given phenomena (non-formal learning and professional development). Phenomenography is concerned with "the relation between the subjects and the phenomenon and not the phenomenon itself" (Bowden and Green, 2005, p. 12). The reason for this form of qualitative approach is because the research questions which need to be answered relate to the HR practitioners' understanding and experience of, and relationship with, the phenomena. By concentrating on the differences identified by the participants, the truth of the phenomena being studied will emerge (Sjostrom and Dahlgren, 2002). It seemed to me that by using the phenomenographical approach, a fresh perspective about how the "learning about the phenomenon is undertaken, experienced and applied in context" (Stein *et al.*, 2009, p. 1) would emerge. The historical approach to research in relation to professional development and CPD (Farmer and

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Campbell, 1997; Rothwell and Arnold, 2005) has been mainly phenomenological, which Marton identifies as being concerned with "describing what the world would look like without having learned or taken for granted" (Richardson, 1999, p. 60). People, in this context HR practitioners, are all individuals, have had varying experiences and will, as a result, experience a phenomena differently, which would appear to be justification for a phenomenographical approach. Not only that but in the light of the notion that conceptions (Stein *et al.*, 2009) and thoughts (Beddoes-Jones, 1999) influence individuals' behaviours and perspectives, it seems likely that the phenomenographic approach may generate new data. Stein *et al.* (2009, p. 1) seem to concur when they say "the conceptions an individual holds about a phenomenon can influence and determine associated behaviours and perspectives". Another reason for using this approach is that there have been important contributions to learning and teaching knowledge which have resulted from previous phenomenographical research (Prosser and Trigwell, 1997; Watkins, 2004). In fact, phenomenography has been used to research various experiences of learning (Mann, 2009) and the foci of this study, professional development and non-formal learning mechanisms, relate to learning.

Although there does not appear to be a large number of phenomenographical studies on the subject of professional development, one was carried out by Stein *et al.* (2009) to discover the conceptions of e-learning and professional development for e-learning held by tertiary educators in New Zealand, which provided some insight for producing professional development programmes. The methodology for this study then needs to be a "hybrid" and will incorporate elements of a phenomenographical study.

As this is an investigative study, it was important that all relevant people were included. The sampling frame for this research comprised all HR practitioners in the North of Scotland. The reason for this sampling frame was that it covers a wide geographical area comprising a large number and variety of organisations from a diverse range of industries and it is the area in which I live and work (Aberdeenshire Council, 2012). The main city being Aberdeen the "Oil Capital" of Europe (Wearn, 2012).

As might be expected, in such a large geographical area, a wide range of industry sectors operate, including local authority, NHS, energy, renewables, construction, hospitality and retail. There is a high CIPD membership (in excess of 1900 members) (CIPD, 2010) in the North of Scotland, plus an unknown number of non-CIPD members and for this reason, I came to the conclusion that this area would provide a sampling frame which was comprehensive enough to provide sufficient variation for the purpose of this study. HR practitioners do not need to be CIPD members to practice, and anecdotal evidence, based on my contacts within the area both as a former HR practitioner and consultant and in my current role as a lecturer in HR, tells me that there are a substantial number of HR practitioners who are non-CIPD members. In an attempt to eliminate bias, ensure validity and reliability (Cope, 2002) and maximise the variation of understanding and experiences of HR practitioners towards professional development and non-formal learning, a broad variation of participant categories was sought. In the case of phenomenographic research, data were collected in a confined period, unlike other qualitative research studies where for reasons of validity, long periods in the field are recommended (Lincoln and Guba, 1985), and the context is important in the selection of participants and the interview schedule (Green, 2005). These categories were CIPD members, non-CIPD members, both sexes, different levels of job role and varying lengths and types of service as an HR practitioner.

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The sample group was selected purposively (Ashwin, 2006) and supplemented by quota sampling to ensure the strata identified above were included (Saunders *et al.*, 2003; Hornung, 2007). Seventeen participants were selected with a view to identifying additional participants, should this be necessary. The group comprised 12 CIPD members, 5 non-CIPD members, 12 females and 5 males, 7 with 20+ years' service, 4 with 10-20 years' service and 6 with less than 10 years' service; three holding senior HR positions, two independent consultants, nine holding mid-level positions and three holding junior roles.

Access to all participants came about through my involvement as the local CIPD branch committee member and CPD advisor, as an active member of the local HR community, as a member of ITOL and through my job as an HR lecturer.

There is differing opinion on the sample size in phenomenographic studies. Swartling *et al.* (2007) identify that, generally, a sample size of between 17 and 20 participants captures all existing variation. Soon and Barnard (2002) interviewed two participants in their study concerning HIV patients' conceptions of counselling, Stenstrom *et al.* (1993) interviewed nine participants in their study concerning life with rheumatoid arthritis, while Shreeve (2010) interviewed 16 people on the subject of the relationship between professional practice and teaching that practice to others.

The interview questions were carefully and deliberately constructed to ensure consistency with the phenomenographic approach as well as ensuring validity (Cope, 2002). When devising the questions, I was mindful to limit the number of pre-prepared questions as highlighted by Ashworth and Lucas (1998) because with a phenomenographic approach, it is important to explore participants' experiences of the phenomenon. By asking the questions I did and framing them in the way that I did, I aimed to discover all that is relevant as well as what the participants have experienced to be as close to the participants' truth as possible. As Hollway and Jefferson (2000, p. 3) intimate, "who are we to know any better than the participants when it is, after all, their lives?" To further ensure validity and reliability, during the interviews I worked hard to "bracket" my assumptions and beliefs (Ashworth and Lucas, 2000; Cope, 2002). I used the concept of "empathy" to help me achieve this (Ashworth and Lucas, 2000) difficult task (Uljens, 1996).

By the time I had completed the 17th interview, there was little new information, which led me to believe that saturation had been reached and the study would likely, if data collection continued, become deductive, which was not the intention in this study (Kelly, 2002).

Results and discussion

There are two outcomes of phenomenographic analysis, the first is categories of description and the second is to explain the relationship of the categories – the outcome space – and the relevant cross category themes, or dimensions of variation within the outcome space (Trigwell, 2006; Anden *et al.*, 2009; Soon and Barnard, 2002). Mindful of validity and reliability in the research process, the analysis followed the four-step process suggested by Marton (1994), cited by Schroder *et al.* (2005) and Soon and Barnard (2002). Throughout the whole analysis process, the research questions were uppermost in my mind as well as my responsibility to the participants in terms of interpreting not only what and how they responded but the context also. Throughout the analysis process, I was consciously mindful of interpretive awareness (Sanbergh, 2006). In addition, each step involved much immersion and iteration of the data. Based on Sanbergh's (2006) suggestion, feedback from colleague lecturers and doctoral

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students was sought at various stages of the analysis process. Direct quotes were used throughout the analysis process to aid transparency and reliability in as much as the reader is in a position to make a judgement on the findings as they are presented (Sandelowski, 1993; Cope, 2002).

The first step involved immersing myself in the data and identifying relevant utterances. The second step involved identifying, interpreting and extracting those conceptions (pools of meaning), from the utterances. The third step involved the organisation of the results, based on similarity and difference in meaning, of this analysis into descriptive categories or, categories of description which are really "expressions of understanding" (Barnard *et al.*, 1999, p. 210). During this stage, and for reasons of validity and reliability, I presented my categories to colleagues – fellow lecturers in HR, and to my fellow doctoral students in two separate presentations. Refinements to the categories were made as a result of feedback and discussion resulting from these presentations. The fourth and final step involved establishing the relationship between the descriptive categories and the outcome space (Anden *et al.*, 2009; Soon and Barnard, 2002). Again feedback was sought from colleagues with regard to the relationship – in the form of a poster presentation at a doctoral conference. Refinement followed the feedback I received from this conference.

The findings of this study are that: In answer to the first research question, the collective view of the practitioners interviewed was that they experienced five qualitatively different ways of professional development, namely:

(1) professional development is experienced by HR practitioners as including a wide range of components;

(2) professional development is experienced by HR practitioners as a means of keeping up to date;

(3) professional development is experienced by HR practitioners as occurring in many different ways;

(4) professional development is experienced by HR practitioners as being part of HR practice; and

(5) professional development is experienced by HR practitioners as enabling them to bring benefits to a range of stakeholders.

The dimensions of variation, or recognisable themes, which exist across all the categories relating to the ways in which the participants experienced that professional development, were credibility and control.

The structural relationship of the categories of this phenomenon is firstly, "what" professional development is; two of the categories explained the "what" element. Secondly, "how" professional development is carried out. Thirdly, "when" professional development is carried out; and fourthly, "why" professional development is carried out.

The outcome space illustrating these findings is shown in Figure 1.

I highlighted above that participation in CPD by HR professionals appears to be erratic (Friedman and Phillips, 2001; Farmer and Campbell, 1997), but the findings in this study have been that the experience of the participants is not erratic but rather a feature of their day-to-day practice. "I am constantly looking for opportunities to enhance my professional knowledge". The fact that the findings support the literature reflecting the wide range of components of professional development (CIPD, 2007;

Source: Author

Figure 1.
Outcome space – professional development

Conlon, 2004; Shaw *et al.*, 1999) illustrates the awareness of the participants of the breadth of skills and competences required by the contemporary HR practitioner. It was the experience of the participants that keeping up to date was necessary and important (Smith, 2003; Wisniewski and McMahon, 2005). As one participant intimated "absolutely critical that you keep up to date", which seemingly dispels Cullen *et al.*'s (2002) and Evans' (2009) concerns. What did emerge with regard to this category was that the job role and level of the individual practitioner and their pre-service training have a direct impact on their development needs. The findings seem to confirm that participants' experience was that they recognised that pre-service training was likely to be insufficient for the duration of their career, a concern raised by Murphy *et al.* (2006). Participant experience concurred with the literature in that it was recognised that professional development occurred in many different ways; participants specifically identified practice-based experiences as being preferred ways of developing their knowledge and skills (Gold *et al.*, 2007). Participant experience was that professional development is a feature of their day-to-day practice which seems to reflect, to some extent, Evans' (2008) concept of developmentalism. The final category of description relates to the benefits of professional development. Participant experience was that the benefits were not just for the practitioner but a much wider range of stakeholders including the organisation(s) for which they work but also line managers, other employees and colleagues (Evans, 1999; Reed, 2008). "My credibility", "benefit of the organisation", "support the managers".

In answer to the second research question, the participants experienced five qualitatively different ways of experiencing non-formal learning, namely:

(1) non-formal learning is experienced as a means of professional development;

(2) non-formal learning is experienced as comprising many different forms;

(3) non-formal learning is experienced as unplanned;

(4) the recording of non-formal learning is experienced as important; and

(5) non-formal learning is experienced as involving other people.

The cross-category themes which emerged were motivation and reflection.

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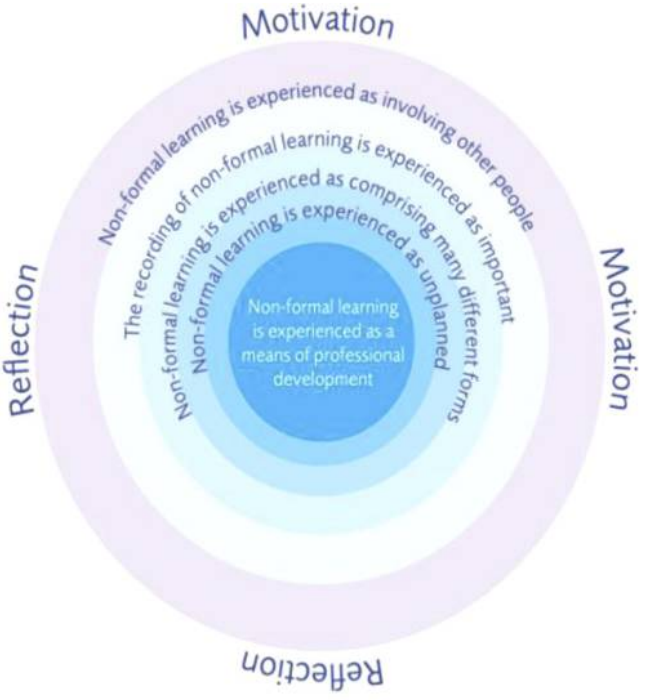
The structural relationship emerged as nested, with professional development at the heart; secondly, the many different forms of non-formal learning; thirdly, the unplanned nature of non-formal learning; fourthly, the recording of the non-formal learning which occurs as a means of professional development; and finally, the category which encompasses all the other categories, is that non-formal learning is experienced as involving other people. Not only that but there was a relationship between the two outcome spaces in that non-formal learning was one of the "how" elements of the professional development phenomenon.

The five categories of description, outcome space and dimensions of variation for non-formal learning are illustrated in Figure 2:

The findings of this study seem to concur with Eraut's (2000, 2001) view that non-formal learning is an area worthy of further investigation:

> We'd either write up a new policy or tweak an existing policy and then maybe have lunch club to describe to staff, I think learning is more effective that way.

While this study highlighted that non-formal learning is a means of the participant HR practitioners professional development, it is not always consciously used, and therefore, some work needs to be done in terms of raising awareness. The experience of the participants in this study seems to be that non-formal learning is unplanned "in airports" and *ad hoc*, which seems to concur with Marsick and Watkins (1997). This can lead to criticism relating to the validity of this form of development as identified by



Source: Author

Figure 2.
Outcome space non-formal learning

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Marsick and Volpe (1999). Given the positive attitude towards non-formal learning, there is some work to be done to mitigate this criticism. "a more informal way of learning that's definitely what I would prefer, definitely". Participant experience highlighted a wide range of non-formal mechanisms being used, for example mentoring, network and feedback (Cheetham and Chivers, 2001). The experience of the participants of this study was that the recording of non-formal learning was important. "don't know how (you really learn) if you didn't actually have to write it down." It was, though, acknowledged by the participants that despite their understanding the value of recording CPD, they did not consistently record their professional development, something which is reflected in the literature (Digenti, 2000; Donyai *et al.*, 2010; Fulford, 2012; Mathews, 2013), and something which needs to be addressed. The findings of this study reflect the importance and extent of the involvement of other people in the participants of this study's experience of non-formal learning. The involvement of others – colleagues, peers and groups of peers and colleagues – seemed to be something the participants welcomed and embraced. "some of the most useful CPD I've ever had is just calling up a colleague and saying what do you think?" Cheetham and Chivers (2005) and Hase and Kenyon (2000, 2007) highlighted that professional development need not be a solitary process and that collaborative learning can bring benefits.

Conclusions

A number of findings resulted from this exploratory study. These are outlined in the remainder of this paper. I believe though, that although the focus of this study was the HR profession, the findings are relevant to a wider range of professions. The findings are relevant and are likely to be of interest to practitioners, employers and professional bodies.

This research suggests that formal qualifications are important particularly for the credibility and status of the profession and that non-formal learning mechanisms were widely used and, in many cases, preferred for ongoing professional development. The findings indicated that all stakeholders need to be aware that there are a wide range of components to professional development required by contemporary HR practitioners including business-savvy and transferable skills and which need to be addressed in the professional development of those practitioners. Keeping up to date is fundamental to the status of the HR practitioner, it brings benefits to all stakeholders including the profession. Keeping up to date will involve the practitioner taking into account their particular job role and planning their development accordingly. Findings suggested that practitioners are willing to take responsibility for their development, though they do need formal and structured support from employers and the professional body.

Professional development should not be commoditised; it is more important than that. One illustration of the importance is as a result of the position of HR within contemporary organisations; the ambiguities faced by HR and the skills required to cope with the resulting challenges. This discussion highlighted the importance of professional development for HR practitioners. Professional development is, in fact, a part of everyday HR practice and continuous participation in professional development relevant to the job role of the individual practitioner.

This research found that non-formal learning is widely used – the problem is that it needs to be recorded and recognised and not seen as the "poor relation" of development. This study suggested that practitioners value collaboration with their peers,

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networking, mentoring, coaching, practically based experiences and short, less formal learning events. Despite the seeming popularity of non-formal learning, it was not an immediately recognised or understood form of professional development.

There are a number of implications for practice which emerge from these findings. Firstly, the implications relevant to the practitioners themselves. They need to be aware of the wide and diverse range of components they require to be effective HR practitioners and that these will change as their career progresses. They also need to be aware that these components can be developed through a wide range of learning mechanisms and in particular non-formal, more accessible mechanisms which are often in the course of their day-to-day activities. They need to be aware that these non-formal mechanisms are likely to be unplanned and so practitioners need to be vigilant in recognising learning opportunities. They need to be aware that they must take responsibility for their own development, as it is fundamental to their credibility as a practitioner, their future career progression and to the profession as a whole. They need to be aware and ensure that their learning can be demonstrated as adding value to the business through their improved practice.

Secondly, the implications for employers include that there are benefits for them if their employees keep their knowledge and skills up to date, but they do need to provide opportunities, and support their employees to learn and that the learning is recognised in the form of, for example, promotions. They need to be aware that practitioners believe they derive most benefit from, and prefer, the less formal means of learning such as coaching and mentoring compared to the more traditional and structured learning mechanisms. Employers need also to be aware that practitioners enjoy working with others in terms of learning.

Thirdly, implications for the professional body and educators of HR practitioners. They need to be aware that practitioners need to have the skill to learn effectively – a skill which needs to be addressed in pre-service training. This skill involves the process of reflection which is often not fully understood or carried out fully. The professional body needs to find ways of ensuring that learning by their members from less formal mechanisms needs to be recognised. The non-formal mechanisms should in no way be perceived as replacing rather be complementary to the more traditional mechanisms.

There are limitations acknowledged in this study, such as the small sample size my own "inside" position of the profession and the specific geographical area. The main strength of this research is in the use of the phenomenographical approach. By using this approach, practitioners in the North of Scotland have been given a voice with regard to their professional development and the use of non-formal learning in that development. The practitioners involved in the study have used that voice to inform fellow practitioners, employers and professional bodies of their experiences and attitudes towards this important subject.

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