

# Today's HRD professionals

An independent consultant and HRD professional gives you his perspective on where consulting and training meet in the real business world of today.

By Richard Koonce

In today's business environment, how do you describe to colleagues what you do? Do you call yourself a trainer, an HRD specialist, a facilitator, a consultant, or a coach? Chances are, if your career trajectory has been anything like mine, you have or will use all five of those titles at some point in your career as an HRD professional. That's because with any successful career comes

ever been. In global companies especially, there's greater respect for the training and development profession than in years past. Hundreds of us have become chief learning officers. Pat Crull, CLO with Toys "R" Us and 2004 chair of the ASTD Board of Directors, reminds us that HRD practitioners increasingly have a seat at the strategic planning table. In those companies, t&d practi-

increasing job responsibility, organizational accountability, and demands on your professional skills. More important, in the current business world the needs of the organizations we serve grow more demanding every day, requiring us to assume roles that are increasingly complex and consultative.

Fewer calls are for canned, off-the-shelf training programs. There's more demand for HRD practitioners who can act as content experts, process consultants, and developers of customized training packages. Members of our profession are involved in every kind of work imaginable—from business mission development and strategy execution, to Six Sigma initiatives, e-learning, executive coaching, and IT implementation.

Our profession faces increasing challenges to quantify program and course effectiveness and to link changes in managerial and executive behavior to bottom-line business performance. Our work is more strategic and enterprise-wide than it has

tioners interact with senior executives and influence business strategy development and execution as never before. Still, our profession struggles to define its role in some organizations and to be taken seriously by many top executives.

What can you, as an individual HRD professional, do to ensure a more strategic role in *your* organization? How can you, as an HRD practitioner (either internal or external), bring maximum value to the work you do, enhance your job satisfaction, and increase your organizational visibility? Here are some ideas.

**Recognize that a well-rounded HRD professional nowadays must be equally comfortable playing the roles of trainer, facilitator, coach, and consultant.** This is important because so much of learning-related work in organizations requires different but related kinds of knowledge transfer, depending on the setting and situation. Because much of that involves customized work, close collabora-

tion with stakeholders to develop and deliver the training is crucial. On top of that, the roles of trainer, facilitator, consultant, and coach follow a natural arc or continuum of activities that often flow from one to the next then back again.

Chances are, you'll ensure your professional career mobility and job satisfaction when you cultivate skills in all of the roles just described. You'll also increase the demand for your services. Limit yourself to any one of those roles and you'll likely limit your professional options.

 "Putting New Competencies to Work for You" (May T+D) and "2004 ASTD Competency Study"; [www.astd.org](http://www.astd.org)

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For example, many of us began as stand-up presenters, then moved on to become instructional design consultants or performance coaches. Others have facilitated high-level management team meetings that invariably led to the rollout of training programs to lower-level managers or executives. Consultants often approach organizations to help with communications issues or goal-setting priorities, only to be asked to work one-on-one with senior executives on issues relating to job performance and leadership effectiveness. Still others have worked as facilitators with top leadership teams in companies, then put on our consultant hats to help roll out change management programs to lower echelons of executives, managers, and supervisors.

For some people, the need to toggle among those different professional roles—and to work on all organizational levels—can be stressful, even onerous. But in my experience, it's a reality for most HRD practitioners these days, especially if they want to guarantee their upward professional mobility. Such role flexibility is especially critical if you're an independent consultant, like me. It affords the opportunity for professional variety and stretch, and the opportunity to impact organizational clients in multiple ways at many levels.

**Develop an in-depth knowledge of your company's core business or businesses and use that to promote your credibility as a learning consultant to upper management.** To be an effective HRD practitioner, you must acquire strong line experience in some functional area of your company's business—either as a line manager or training consultant. That can be in sales and marketing, manufacturing, e-business, or R&D. It might also be in finance, Six Sigma, change management, customer care, supply chain optimization, or quality assurance.

Look around at the world's leading corporations. You'll see that many of the most robust, challenging, and well-paying training and HRD jobs are held by people who also have strong business experience and knowledge in one of those areas. And if you look closely, you'll see that a lot of their job responsibility hinges on aligning specific processes or departmental operations with critical, overarching business goals or strategic operating objectives. If you take it upon yourself to develop your knowledge base in one of those areas, perhaps by doing a tour of duty in one of your company's key lines of business or a

key process area, you'll earn the respect of top managers and make yourself indispensable. That's because training and knowledge transfer is critical to every one of those functional areas.

Take change management, for example. Business transformation has become critical to the livelihood of all companies. Thus, HRD practitioners who become well versed in the practical application of change management principles, and get involved in driving change management efforts forward with one of their company's business units or divisions, are likely to find themselves called upon by their CEO to help drive change management initiatives across the entire organization. They're also likely to be tapped to help facilitate merger and acquisition activities, process redesign projects, customer care initiatives, and other kinds of change activities. HRD practitioners have a great deal to offer in this arena, especially when it comes to managing the "people side."

Six Sigma implementations afford yet another challenging opportunity for trainers and HRD practitioners. So, developing knowledge in that area can keep your training and knowledge management skills in demand. Six Sigma is embraced by some companies as a way to boost production levels, reduce error rates, and increase customer satisfaction levels in production processes. It also involves the redesign of how everyday work gets done in an organization. As such, training activities and knowledge transfer can be key elements of Six Sigma projects because a tremendous amount of methodology and statistical know-how must be shared by Six Sigma experts with others inside an organization to drive work process redesign efforts and improve production processes.

In many cases, people who teach Six Sigma skills and methodology inside companies are highly paid external consultants. In other cases, they are internal HRD and training professionals who develop specific expertise in Six Sigma methodology and metrics. They assume powerful positions as Six Sigma champions and project leaders inside their companies, often driving implementation of Six Sigma methods across a wide variety of business operations.

Those are just two growth areas for training and HRD services. Become an

expert in those (or others) and your credibility as a consultant to top management in your organization will grow by leaps and bounds. And you'll find yourself in top demand to help with initiatives not only where you are now, but also across your organization.

**To ensure a place for training at the leadership table, it's critical that trainers and HRD practitioners not only learn the functional elements of their company's business, but also partner closely with top management to develop solutions to a wide variety of business and organizational problems.** What's most on the minds of corporate CEOs? In the February issue of *T+D*, contributing editor Kevin Oakes, in his column E-Learning, provides an ideal formula for understanding how best to serve the needs of clients in the executive suite. Oakes writes: "Increasing revenues, reducing expenses, and reducing cycle time are the three things that senior executives worry about and talk about most. In order to gain a seat at the table, learning professionals must be able to connect their work to one or more of those desired outcomes."

That means, among other things, becoming conversant with the metrics your company uses to measure productivity, cost, expenses, and cycle times. It also means tracking (and becoming expert on) trends with large-gauge implications for the business.

For example, outsourcing is emerging as a major business activity, largely because it greatly reduces manufacturing and production costs. What are its implications for your company? How might your role as an HRD practitioner prove useful to helping your CEO implement outsourcing strategies? E-business, global product marketing, raw materials sourcing, brand building, management of multicultural workforces, and supply-chain optimization are huge issues in business, especially given the global econ-

omy. How can you see the training and HRD functions supporting the work of your company in those areas?

Become knowledgeable about those issues so that you speak the same language of business that your clients in the executive suite do—and so you'll have the credibility to work as a strategic consultant to your company's top executives on those matters. Doing so won't just help your company; it will catapult your career into a higher orbit. You'll likely have the opportunity to do creative, breakthrough consulting work; complete challenging assignments; function in cross-cultural settings; travel to far-flung company locations; stretch yourself intellectually; and develop an enterprise-wide view of your business—considered a key attribute of top-level managers and executives in virtually all businesses nowadays.

**You won't be successful as an HRD practitioner unless you develop an in-depth understanding of the internal "system dynamics" at work in your organization. They influence everything!** Understanding that your organization is, in essence, a living organism—with its own personality, character traits, quirks, and defense mechanisms—is critical to you being effective in your job. That's because training programs, leadership development courses, and learning interventions won't be very effective if conducted in the context of an organization whose culture resists change, or if they're designed without bearing the needs of your organization in mind. Instead, training and HRD initiatives of other kinds are best designed with the nature and characteristics of an organization in mind.

"Training is often very theoretical and comes from a certain model or construct that people have come up with," says Howard Ross, co-founder of Cook Ross, a consulting and training firm in Silver Spring, Maryland, as to how learning should be accomplished. "But," contin-

ues Ross, "it may not have any relationship to the specific dynamics at work in an organization." Ross is a big believer in designing training based on careful empirical research, including employee surveys, focus groups, and interviews.

In virtually all organizations, some or a great deal of dysfunction exists. As an HRD professional, it's important to understand the nature of organizational dysfunction and job toxicity. Otherwise, you risk becoming enmeshed in the culture and dysfunction of the very organization you serve and you won't be able to do effective learning and organizational interventions when they're called for.

Understanding the organizational context in which you operate is key to organizational awareness and job effectiveness. It's important to understand the nature of your organization's culture, as well as its leadership styles, traditions, social norms, and neuroses. You must know how it promotes and rewards people, and who it promotes, rewards, and punishes. Understanding how your organization actually works is essential if you want to push a learning agenda and navigate political land mines as you advance that agenda.

The best way to gain insight into your organization as a system is to do a comprehensive organizational assessment. Let's say you've been charged with developing a culture change program. You can use the results from an organizational assessment to develop a culture change training program that specifically addresses key obstacles to—and employee concerns about—change as identified in the assessment. The program can also be designed to help employees make the transition into new job roles and to acquaint them with new management expectations, as well as new reward, recognition, and performance measurement systems.

You can also use assessment data to help you design teambuilding programs, succession plans, and executive coaching activities—all intended to help your

company retain, recruit, and build a motivated workforce after a major downsizing or restructuring.

Many organizational design and assessment tools are available, but one of the best I've found was developed by Dr. W. Warner Burke of Teachers College, Columbia University. His assessment instrument drills down to provide in-depth data on numerous organizational factors—everything from strategy and mission to management practices, culture, and employee-manager behavior—that drive how an organization operates and how people do their jobs on a daily basis. Burke's assessment is a wonderfully rich and nuanced instrument for strategic planning and culture change efforts, training and job design, and process redesign.

**Become a resource to the company's top leaders on talent development, recruitment, enterprise learning, and other intellectual capital issues critical to future organizational health and competitiveness.** It's axiomatic that in the current business environment, you must view top executives, line managers, process owners, and others as your clients. But what does that *really* mean? One, it means becoming highly proactive in managing communications and business relationships with these people. It means framing business issues with an eye toward helping the CEO and top leadership team take a more strategic approach to *your* business. And it means making the argument for how learning and leadership development initiatives can help support development and execution of the company's business plans.

You'll begin to see your efforts gaining traction with top executives when you start talking about those issues with them, when you demonstrate knowledge of the granular finances that propel the business on a daily basis, and when you build strategic political alliances within the company

to advance specific learning objectives. Be sure also to show tangible and quantifiable proof of how specifically developed learning objectives have led to concrete business results—either in your company before or in the case of your competitors.

### What's your consulting style?

I believe there's a lot of opportunity and need for HRD practitioners to bring their "human side" to their work in ways many never do. I feel that the passion, intensity, intuition, honesty, humor, and toughness I've tried to bring to my professional work are at least as important to success with clients as my professional competencies and academic background—maybe more. Geoffrey Bellman, in his book *The Consultant's Calling*, writes: "I believe each of us must bring who we are to what we do and that our responsibility to do that grows with age and experience."

For example, if we don't push back with clients sometimes when we think they're wrong, we risk compromising our personal values and suboptimizing our effectiveness. If we don't occasionally challenge a client's operating methods or question the direction an organization is moving in, we can do that client a disservice. Can you imagine what might have happened at Enron or World.com, for example, had someone in HRD working at top levels in those organizations questioned the path in which those companies were going?

Still another way we can be more human and authentic with our clients is by being willing to display our vulnerability and even our ignorance. So says Jane Shore, principal of Rosewood LLC, a Washington, D.C.-based executive coaching firm. "Even content specialists can and should do that," she advises. And why not? Change is uprooting management assumptions, organizational theories, and business models on an almost daily basis, says Shore. "Oftentimes,

organizations must be willing to give up old ideas and information in order to be ready for new learning, or to foster the climate for it to occur within an organization or a top leadership team."

As a consultant and facilitator, I have often leveraged my lack of knowledge on a topic to invite broad-based discussions in group settings. Interestingly, I think "the use of ignorance" and "shared learning" work well in many HRD settings, such as coaching engagements. Good coaching relationships are almost always based on shared learning. The goal is typically not to see a knowledge transfer from the coach to the client, but rather the empowerment of the client's own learning by virtue of the coach's presence and feedback. The coach and client are co-partners in an education and awareness process, intended to fulfill the needs of the client and involve a contract of learning and self-disclosure between both parties to the conversation—a relationship in which both parties ultimately gain from the experience. Vulnerability, ignorance, and shared learning as a consulting approach can help foster group engagement and participation or stimulate breakthrough thinking and problem solving.

Leveraging all of the skills and attributes as part of our practitioner tool kits will make us as effective in the HRD arena as we hope to be—or as long-lasting in our influence over corporate leaders, business strategies, work processes, and employee performance as organizations need us to be. **TD**

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