

Shifting to an HRD Systems Approach

More and more, HRD professionals find themselves managing learning resources—instead of only planning, scheduling and conducting instructional activities.

By MALCOLM S. KNOWLES

The HRD practitioner who simply provides instructional activities is a quaint reminder of the old industrial age. As corporations concentrate further on information and services, a new player has entered the field: the HRD specialist who manages a system of learning resources.

Several well-known forces have been responsible for this transformation of HRD functions: an aging work force that switches jobs more often and retires later; revolutionary changes in educational technologies; and a knowledge explosion that is expanding our understanding of adult learning. By the end of this decade, most educational services will be delivered electronically, and they will be tailored to individual differences in learners' backgrounds, learning styles, experiences and goals.

Another force, more difficult to document, is the growing realization of business and industry leaders that their most important asset is their human capital, and that productivity is a function as much of the quality of their workers as of the quality of their machinery. This has resulted in increased willingness to invest in human resource development.

Finally, the last 20 years have seen the rise of systems theory in all disciplines. Thinking in terms of "wholes" or systems

has become a necessity in an increasingly complex world. The traditional linear, fragmental approach to planning, problem solving, managing and evaluating no longer functions.

A few good questions

For HRD to adapt, the field must reconceptualize the corporation as a system of learning resources. The first question we have to ask is, "What are *all* of the resources for learning in the system?" In a typical corporation, the list might look like this:

- All instructional programs planned, conducted or contracted for by the HRD department.
- All line supervisors and managers.
- Print and audio-visual materials and computer programs in the media center.
- All work groups.
- All of the individuals in the system, including various specialists.
- Individuals and programs outside the system but available to the system.

The second question we have to ask is, "How can we use these resources to optimize human growth and development within the system?" Resources include:

- *Scheduled instructional activities.* Are they congruent with modern principles of adult learning? If not, they would have to be modified considerably to: involve the learners actively in a process of self-directed inquiry, use the learners' experiences as a resource for their learning, gear the programs to the learners' developmental tasks and to the learners' application orientation, and involve the

learners in evaluating their successes and failures.

Are they available to the learners at times and in places that are convenient to them? If not, reschedule.

Are the teachers, trainers and resource people trained to work specifically with adults? If not, change should be made in the recruitment, orientation and training of these personnel.

- *The line supervisors and managers.* Do they understand they are responsible for facilitating the growth and development of their workers? Many now see themselves responsible primarily—if not exclusively—for supervision. Job descriptions should spell out development responsibilities.

Do they understand the principles and techniques of adult development? Most understand education only in the way they were taught in school: teaching as telling. Units on the principles of adult learning and skills that facilitate learning (some call them coaching skills) should be built into supervisory training and management development programs.

Do they use the corporation's personnel appraisal system for assessing learning needs as well as assessing work performance? Some corporations that have trained their supervisors and managers to do this report it is the single most productive source of information about training needs.

- *Printed materials and media.* Do all personnel at all levels and in all shifts have easy access to them? Often, only higher level personnel use them; media centers frequently are closed during the hours that many workers could use them.

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Do all personnel have information about what materials and media programs are available and how to use them effectively? One media center I know distributes information about materials appropriate for different categories of personnel periodically and has skilled media consultants available to help them select and use them.

■ *Work groups.* Is time set aside for them to assess periodically their learning needs and plan ways to meet them? Several corporations that use quality circles (or adaptations) stress educational improvement as well as work improvement.

Are work groups used for peer help and psychic support in learning? One corporation I know incorporated sessions on helping skills into its training program.

■ *Individuals in the system.* Has information been obtained about the special knowledge and skills all individuals possess that they might share? One corporation periodically sends a form to its personnel asking them to identify such knowledge and skills and enters this information into a computer data bank. The HRD manager told me that the first time he did this he was amazed at the quantity and quality of information volunteered.

Does a mechanism exist for linking employees who want to learn something with those who can help them? The above corporation put the information about its employees' special knowledge and skills into a data bank and notified all personnel that an educational brokering center was established in the media center for such linkage. (During a visit to the center, I overheard a man telling the educational broker that he had learned he was being transferred to the company's Brazil plant in six months, and that he would like to learn Portuguese. The broker keyed a code into the computer and out came a printout with about 40 names. The broker called someone the inquirer knew and arranged for the two to get together (on company time) several hours a week.

■ *Individuals and programs outside the system.* Does information exist about programs available in institutions in the community—schools, community colleges, colleges and universities, government agencies, voluntary organizations and commercial providers—that are open to members of the system? This information can be obtained by a simple community survey, but may also be found in a public library.

Is this information readily accessible to employees? (In the above corporation,

this information is entered into the educational brokering center's data bank.)

Making HRD systematic

If nothing more is done than what has been described so far, the quality of human resource development in a corporation probably would be improved. But learning still would be episodic, fragmented and disconnected. It can be made more systematic, incremental and continuous through the use of learning contracts or plans. (Some corporations shy away from the term "contract," in the belief that a dollar sign and a lawyer usually are attached to a contract).

A contract simply specifies what an individual's objectives are for a given learning project, what resources will be used in fulfilling the objectives, what evidence will be collected to demonstrate that the objectives have been fulfilled, how that evidence will be judged or validated and the target date for accomplishing each objective.

In one corporation the contract is negotiated between the individual and the HRD staff; in another, it is between the individual and his or her supervisor; in another, it is between the individual and a team consisting of the supervisor, a representative of the HRD department and a peer. Progress toward fulfilling the contract is monitored, and the evidence is validated by these same parties. Several corporations with a management-by-objectives program have incorporated the contracting process.

Several things happen when a systems approach is adopted. A heavier responsibility is put on line supervisors and managers for the development of their personnel than traditionally has been the case. After all, they are available every day. This integrates the HRD function more closely with the operating function. And, line supervisors and managers derive added self-esteem and satisfaction from their development role once they become adept at it.

Employees find that their personal and professional development are more integrated with their work life. A much wider range of resources for learning is available, and employees are more directly involved in planning and achieving their own development—adding to their self-esteem and satisfaction.

For HRD professionals, the systems approach represents a major shift in role. They are less concerned with planning,

scheduling and conducting instructional activities, and more concerned with managing a system. One of their major responsibilities is to serve as consultants to the line supervisors and managers, a closer and more functional relationship. The special skills required for this new role are consulting, organizing resources and systems management. This role shift also requires increasing emphasis on the continuing professional development of the HRD professionals, as new knowledge about adults as learners emerges, as new resources are developed and as new techniques are invented.

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