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Fostering a Literate U.S. Workforce: Perspectives of Adult Educators in Human Resource Development

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Keywords: adult literacy, adult education, human resource development

Abstract: Organizations are faced with increasing demands for a highly literate and skilled workforce. Investments in basic literacy and skills training are required to effectively address these organizational needs. The purpose of this study was to investigate Human Resource Development's role in investing in and developing the segment of the US workforce that lacks the basic literacy and skills needed to participate in the employment arena.

Over the last several years, the United States' labor force has experienced major shifts in demographics, including an aging workforce, an increasing immigrant population and a declining labor pool (Fullerton, 2005; Jacobs & Hawley, 2003). These demographic shifts, coupled with the growing dependency on technological advances and the streamlining of the global economy, have resulted in an increased demand for highly-skilled workers (Bates & Holton, 2004; Patel 2005). Consequently, while those possessing the necessary education and skills to flourish in this new economy are privileged (Comings, Reder, & Sum, 2001), low-literate, low-skilled workers are held to the margins and denied both access and opportunity to participate in the country's labor market (Torraco, 2007). This marginalization yields increasingly detrimental effects, which, according to Torraco, include subjugation to levels of poverty and alienation from the prevailing culture.

Purpose of Research

Organizations are faced with the ever-growing challenge of increasing demands for a highly literate and skilled workforce. According to a report prepared by the US Department of Education (Lasater & Elliott, 2005), nearly 21% of the adult population operated at the lowest functional literacy levels, which was characterized as not possessing a high school diploma or equivalent. Furthermore, the same report stated that of this 21%, 33% spoke English as a second language, 25% were at or below the poverty level, and 62% were either unemployed or were not active participants in the labor force. Couple this low-literate, low-skilled segment of the US population with the increasing demand for high-skilled workers in the economy, and it becomes quite evident that a gap exists between those who possess the qualifications needed to actively participate in the labor market and those who do not. This gap directly impedes the United States' ability to compete on an international level (Waldron, Roberts, & Reamer, 2004).

Investments in basic literacy and skills training are required to effectively address the need for literate and skilled employees in the workforce. The purpose of this study was to investigate Human Resource Development's (HRD) role in investing in and

developing the segment of the US workforce that lacks the basic literacy and skills needed to participate in the employment arena. Through a comprehensive review of the literature, as well as eight semi-structured interviews, the intersections between adult literacy, adult education and human resource development were explored. The research questions which guided this study were:

- What is literacy and why is it a growing concern in the United States?
- Which domains of literacy are relevant to the field of HRD and why?
- How and why should HRD contribute to promoting a more literate and skilled workforce?

Theoretical Framework

Human resource development is a multidisciplinary field grounded in learning and development, which seeks to produce change through the process of learning (Bierema & Eraut, 2004). According to Swanson and Holton (2009), “Human resource development (HRD) is a process of developing and unleashing expertise for the purpose of improving performance” (pp. 99). This process facilitates the improvement of individuals, groups, systems and organizations through training and development, career development and organization development, with the ultimate goal of achieving increased performance on a holistic level (Ruona, 2000; Swanson & Holton, 2009). HRD is essential within organizational contexts and must operate on multiple levels to address the increasing demands for a highly skilled and literate workforce.

Human capital theory is one of three economic theories most relevant to the field of HRD (Swanson & Holton, 2009). Human capital refers to the skills an individual possesses that the organization values as an asset (Levenson, 2004). Human capital theory states that investments in human resources are essential to organizational success. HRD must add short- and long-term value from investments in the development of knowledge and expertise in individuals and groups of individuals (Swanson & Holton). To remain viable in the competitive market, organizations must continuously develop and invest in their employees, which is the essence of the human capital theory.

Storberg-Walker’s (2005) theory of human capital transformation through human resource development explained the process of how organizations benefit from investing in training and development, as well as organizational development initiatives. By understanding how HRD intervenes in the relationship between the three value creation drivers – human, social and structural capital – learning and development initiatives can be aligned to maximize organizational success. It is this foundational, underlying concept of learning which binds literacy and skills development to HRD, thereby serving as a link between the traditionally conceptualized fields of HRD and Adult Education. Understanding and investing in the learning needs of this segment of the workforce will enhance performance at multiple levels and contribute to the overall ability of the US to maintain a competitive advantage in the global economy.

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research design to garner the unique perspectives and experiences of the participants. Literacy and skills development are

contextually based and evoke different meanings for different people. Accordingly, the participants of this study each had varied and multiple outlooks on this growing, yet often ignored, population of the US workforce. This is the crux of qualitative research – to construct meaning from individual narratives (Merriam, 2009). Given that the relationships between literacy, skills development, adult education and HRD have not been expansively explored in the literature, the complexity of this research agenda warranted the inclusion of multiple voices and narratives. As Creswell (2007) stated, the purpose of interpretivism is to gain an understanding of an individual's particular truth – the way they interpret the world in which they live. In employing this methodology, this study sought to understand the challenges which accompany a low-literate and low-skilled workforce, how those challenges have manifested in scholarship and in practice, and how they have resonated with each participant.

Eight participants were interviewed for this study – four professors and four practitioners. A semi-structured interview guide was developed to frame the conversation and cover the major areas to be addressed. Data analysis was conducted using the constant comparative method to discover emergent themes (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam, 2009). These themes were assessed and analyzed to determine relevancy and applicability to the relationship between adult literacy, workforce development and human resource development.

Findings

The overarching theme which emerged from the data collected was the strong connection between literacy and employability. According to the literature, there was not a singular definition of adult literacy which encompassed all of its intricacies. The participants further provided support that there was not a standard set of characteristics which represented a literate adult. However, there were three fundamental components of literacy presented by the literature and the participants – reading, writing and arithmetic – which were foundational to functioning within the work environment specifically and society in general. These foundational areas proved vital to facilitating an individual's ability to effectively navigate today's increasingly demanding economy.

Looking beyond the traditional aspects of adult literacy, there were additional components which were critical to employability. Possessing basic interactional and interpersonal skills were essential characteristics of prospective job candidates. The ability to communicate and interact with people within organizations were agreed upon basic skills necessary to understand and navigate the workplace. Both access to and knowledge of technological literacy proved to be necessary to being a functioning member of society and the workforce. Other skills, such as financial literacy, family literacy, cultural literacy and critical thinking skills were presented as important to employability. These aforementioned literacy skills, working in conjunction with one another, were presented as being essential to gaining and maintaining employment in the workforce.

The inadequate pool of employable workers with the requisite literacy and skill levels necessary for organizations to thrive in a competitive global economy was a valid concern in both the literature and among the participants. However, the participants disagreed as to when HRD should become involved in addressing these concerns. Some

felt as though HRD had a societal responsibility to invest in low-literate and low-skilled workers pre-employment in an effort to ensure a steady pipeline of employable workers. On the contrary, other participants held the opinion that organizations should focus on the bottom-line and make investments in as much as it benefits the organization's bottom-line. Despite these contrary views, there was a clear agreement that HRD should play a definitive role in developing low-skilled and low-literate workers. A holistic, comprehensive agenda should be established to address these needs, with HRD serving as a collaborative partner in the system with other adult educators and governmental agencies.

Discussion

Cowan (2006) stated that the concept of illiteracy in the United States has evolved from an individual-centered issue to more of a societal issue which has economic consequences. As a result, efforts to address literacy have become part of an overall strategy to develop the workforce. Literacy and work should not be treated as separate entities; rather, literacy and skills training should be contextually based within organizations (Defoe & Folinsbee, 2004). Since HRD is typically situated within organizations, it is essential that HRD become an integral partner in addressing the skills and literacy gap present in the US.

While there are challenges which accompany investing in literacy and skills training, including high training costs and the lack of employee access to educational opportunities (Stuart & Daum, 1999), investments yield benefits at multiple levels, including in the workplace, in the home, and in society (Sticht, 2000). Workforce literacy rates have a corollary relationship with the economic prosperity of individuals, organizations and countries (Blake & Blake, 2005; Manly 2008). Consequently, there are both societal and economic benefits in developing the literacy and numeracy skills for the individual, the organization and the nation.

Comings and Soricone (2007) stated investments in education initiatives in adults demonstrate relatively immediate results. Individuals with access to educational opportunities reap such benefits as higher earning potential and stronger job security (Levenson, 2004; Stuart & Daum, 1999). Applying this to the context of literacy and skill development, successful participation in training would produce an increase in income potential, as well as access to participation within the marketplace (Comings, Reder, & Sum, 2001). Sticht (2000) posited that investing in training that aims to increase the reading, writing and math skills of an employee results in elevated levels of these skills on an individual level, which contribute to increased performance on the job.

Training aimed at elevating the basic literacy and skills of workers results in increased organizational performance (Sticht, 2000). Focusing development efforts on the segment of the population with the lowest literacy and skill levels yields a higher return on investment than those initiatives which target workers with higher levels of proficiency (Coulombe, Tremblay, & Marchand, 2004). Manly (2008) posited that not developing the skills of this population actually serves as a barrier to optimal performance of an organization. Conducting interventions aimed at increasing literacy and skills serves to expand the applicant pool, thereby increasing the competitive stance and performance level of an organization (Jurmo, 2004; Stuart & Daum, 1999).

Initiatives which promote a literate workforce have societal consequences as well, including economic growth (Comings and Soricone, 2007; Sticht, 2000). Manly (2008) stated that investing in the basic skills of a nation's workforce results in the increased economic growth of that nation. Further, these efforts lower the taxation level of US citizens, including welfare, unemployment and health care costs (Levenson, 2004). Stuart and Daum (1999) stated that upgrading the skills of an organization's workforce is essential to being competitive in the global economy and ultimately results in elevating the standard of living of the American workforce.

Implications for Theory and Practice

This research study aimed to bring awareness to the growing literacy and skills gap present in the US workforce, as well as to contribute to HRD and Adult Education theory and practice. From a theory perspective, the findings of this study enhanced and built upon the small body of scholarly literature concerned with the relationship between HRD, Adult Education, literacy and skills development in the United States. Specifically, in framing this research around the often ignored low-literate, low-skilled worker demographic, critical new insights into the learning and performance foundations were uncovered, thereby contributing new knowledge to the field. In addition, from a practice perspective, the skills gap present in the US workforce, as well as the opportunities and challenges accompanying the gap, HRD can contribute to the formulation of a best practices approach in addressing the learning and development needs of this population.

Conclusion

The contextual factors driving the new economy present opportunities and challenges for both employers and employees (Stuart & Dahm, 1999). Organizations are taking advantage of the quickly evolving economy to transition from a reliance on low-wage, low-skilled jobs to the creation of high performance businesses which demand higher-order literacy and skill levels (Bates & Phelan, 2002; Stuart & Dahm). Jackson (2004) stated that individuals who lack the basic literacy and skills level will have a difficult time navigating and achieving goals in the new economy. This ultimately impacts the ability of the organization and the host nation to achieve its goals; the potential performance and viability of an organization are dependent upon the literacy and skills level of its constituents (Stuart & Dahm). In an effort to facilitate the creation of a high performance economy, it is essential that investments be made in training and education interventions aimed at elevating the basic work-related skills necessary to effectively participate in the US economy. As adult educators, it is critical that the field of human resource development (HRD) participate in this effort, given its mission to increase individual and organizational performance through learning interventions (Swanson & Holton, 2009).

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