

Research: The Bridge Between Human Resource Development Practitioners and Scholars

For the past several years, we have debated the difference between traditional HRD practitioners and HRD scholar-practitioners; yet, we have failed to reach a consensus. This debate will continue until we examine and resolve three issues. First, we will never be able to distinguish between these groups until we discover why these groups behave the way they do. Second, research will continue to be avoided by traditional HRD practitioners until they understand that it is a fundamental process of all HRD activity. Once they understand this, they will embrace research as a tool to improve their organizations and enhance their credibility. Third, this debate will continue until the HRD academic community understands that they contribute to the problem by advocating that research is a mysterious and complex activity that only academically trained people can participate in and understand. In addition, the HRD academic community reinforces this belief by using symbols and language, qualitative jargon and statistics, to prevent dialogue that enables others to fully understand and appreciate the benefits of research, thus avoiding research altogether. Many in the HRD academic community also view research as an end in itself rather than embracing research as a process for making informed decisions within organizations.

Differences Between Traditional HRD Practitioners and HRD Scholar-Practitioners

The differences between traditional HRD practitioners and HRD scholar-practitioners may be found in the assumptions and beliefs that these different groups hold about HRD. In other words, what is each group's respective philosophy of HRD, and how does it affect their behaviors and actions?

Many traditional HRD practitioners spend much of their time conducting workshops, seminars, meetings, and conferences and designing classroom-based training events. Consequently, many view training as an end in itself. Management reinforces this belief when it does not use HRD as a strategic tool

in improving organizational performance and effectiveness or hold traditional HRD practitioners accountable for failing to add value to the organization. Moreover, professional associations and training vendors reinforce this belief when they guarantee that they can fix every possible organizational ill using the newest training games, a simple seven-step format, or the “four-quadrant anything.” With this type of reinforcement, it is not surprising that traditional HRD practitioners fail to understand the importance of engaging in research activities that will provide data and valid information to improve decision making within their organization.

Many traditional HRD practitioners do not link their practice to sound theoretical principles that reinforce their actions. As a result, HRD activities are not anchored to proven ways of conducting practice over time. Consequently, traditional HRD practitioners have a hard time discerning between effective practice and the latest fad in the field. This contributes to the quick-fix approach so common in today’s HRD practice. Without a theoretical foundation, traditional HRD practitioners are doomed to focus on training rather than on important activities that improve organizational effectiveness. As a result, their organizations fail to embrace the type of HRD engagements that improve performance and help organizations to achieve strategic goals and objectives.

When traditional HRD practitioners believe that their primary responsibility is to deliver training for training’s sake, all their energy is directed toward the number of training courses they deliver and the number of employees they train. This is a hit-or-miss approach in which some training is on target and improves organizational effectiveness while most is not. As a result, traditional HRD practitioners operate as though training by itself improves organizational performance and effectiveness. They also rely on employees’ responses to training as a means to justify HRD’s existence, rather than focusing on HRD activities that enhance organizational effectiveness. Little thought is given to training’s impact or achievement of the organization’s strategic business goals and objectives.

HRD Scholar-Practitioners

HRD scholar-practitioners understand that thinking strategically about HRD can and will positively affect the firm. Organizational decision makers are not interested in “training” per se but in what training can do for them. Although it is easy to generate a lot of training activity and claim that it makes a difference, it is much harder to identify the organizational results needed and the impact of training on those goals and then to determine whether they have been accomplished.

As a former HRD scholar-practitioner, I viewed research as a process that improves decision making within organizations. Let me illustrate this by going through the process of purchasing a home. Assume that we have concluded that it is time to purchase a home: for whatever reason, our current needs are

not being met. We use research to determine what type of home will satisfy our particular needs. "Our current needs are not being met" becomes our problem statement, which frames the difference between what we currently have versus what we want or need. This obviously differs from person to person. Some people purchase a home as an investment to improve their financial portfolio. Others do so because they need additional space, and some seek to provide themselves stability. Pinpointing the problem frames the reason for purchasing a home and is the beginning of this research project.

Next, we establish criteria that will be used to select our home and gather data on potential properties. Using a variety of data collection methods and techniques helps us develop a comprehensive understanding of our options regarding available homes. We often reflect on the reason we are engaging in this process (is-versus-should analysis); search the Internet or read real estate advertisements (records and reports); drive through neighborhoods (observation); talk to real estate agents about their qualifications to serve us in the purchasing process (interviewing); speak with a loan officer to determine our financial capability to purchase a home including price range, loan rate, and loan duration (interviewing); obtain information about local schools and neighborhoods (records and reports); and schedule house-hunting trips with a real estate agent (observation).

Once we have gathered information about the homes available, we assess the information and identify alternatives. The listing of all possibilities is known as the *total set*. The total set can be divided into two categories: the *awareness set* consists of the homes with which one is familiar, and the *unawareness set* consists of those with which one is not familiar. At this point, all homes in one's price range are often still considered, although only those that meet one's minimum criteria such as square footage, school system, and location will be seriously considered. This is known as the *consideration set*. The other homes are relegated to an *infeasible set*. Although a person has gathered additional information about the homes that are available in the consideration set, a few remain of greater interest. These form the *choice set*; the remainder are placed in the *nonchoice set*. The last phase is a careful evaluation of the choice sets, followed by a final selection, referred to as a *decision*.

Purchasing a home is often as simple as evaluating alternatives. However, several factors may influence the selection of an alternative. For example, our previous experience with purchasing homes may influence the current purchase; our-risk taking tolerance is another consideration, and our tolerance for change will affect the selection. Hopefully, a home will finally be found that meets the most important criteria, and we will make an offer and engage in a negotiation with the seller, which constitutes the implementation phases of the research process. This occurs in more formal research activities when one actually does something with the research findings, such as writing articles for publication, or uses the information to make informed decisions in an organization. Next, we go through the closing process and sign all of the legal

documents required to purchase the home, then arrange to move into our new home.

The last step is to evaluate the “correctness” of the decision. Sometimes people have second thoughts after making a decision such as this one, which is known as *postdecision dissonance* or buyer’s remorse. It is tension created by uncertainty about the decision’s correctness. The person wonders if another alternative would have been a better choice. This condition can often distort the satisfaction level one experiences related to the choice. In most situations, a person’s satisfaction with his or her decision is high; however, regardless of whether it is positive or negative, it must still be evaluated.

This example demonstrates that research can be used to make informed decisions that improve outcomes (e.g., selecting the best house). However, most of us do not think of purchasing a home as a research project because we are taught to think of research as a time-consuming, complex, technical, all-inclusive, formal activity engaged in only by academics and scientists. Clearly, this example meets all of the criteria of recognized quantitative and some qualitative research approaches (e.g., identifying a problem statement; developing a research design; identifying and selecting appropriate data-gathering techniques and methods; gathering and analyzing data; identifying decision criteria; providing recommendations, conclusions, and implications regarding the findings; and evaluating the outcomes). Quite simply, research is used in everyday life to make informed decisions, and it certainly can be used to improve HRD practice as well.

When traditional HRD practitioners begin using research to improve HRD practice, they have *crossed over the line of demarcation* and have become HRD scholar-practitioners. This occurs when HRD scholar-practitioners realize that research helps them as professionals and the organization to accomplish strategic business goals and objectives by improving the decisions made. They realize that better decision making improves organizational effectiveness. Further, HRD scholar-practitioners understand that research is the common core of every HRD activity, which will be discussed in greater detail next.

Research: The Foundation of HRD Scholar-Practitioner Activities

When do HRD scholar-practitioners use research to improve decision making in organizations? Answer: In every activity they perform. Scholar-practitioners realize that embracing research as a core activity of their practice adds value to the organization. Let me illustrate the four most common activities in HRD—analysis, design, implementation, and evaluation—and compare them with a fifth activity, the traditional research process (Table 1).

In Table 1, the four HRD activities have characteristics and use similar phases to that of a traditional research study. All five activities begin with the identification of the problem or the activity to be studied or analyzed. Second,

Table 1. HRD Activities and Practices Compared with the Traditional Research Process

<i>Phases in HRD Activities and Traditional Research</i>	<i>Needs Analysis</i>	<i>Design Interventions</i>	<i>Implementation Interventions</i>	<i>Evaluation</i>	<i>Traditional Research Studies</i>
Problem identification	Clarify the problem or need	Analysis of learning needs	Problem identification	Identify the performance improvement intervention to be evaluated	Problem identification and significance <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Research goals• Research questions
Background and critical information	Collect background information				
	Refine the problem or need		Relationship phase	Identify the purpose of the evaluation	Literature review
	Formulate questions				
Design	Construct the study design	Design of learning programs	Diagnostic phase	Develop an evaluation design	Method <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Type of research conducted• Population• Instrument development• Data collection methods• Method of data analysis
	Specify how information about problems or needs will be collected	Development of learning materials		Analyze resource and constraints	

(Continued)

Table 1. HRD Activities and Practices Compared with the Traditional Research Process (Continued)

<i>Phases in HRD Activities and Traditional Research</i>	<i>Needs Analysis</i>	<i>Design Interventions</i>	<i>Implementation Interventions</i>	<i>Evaluation</i>	<i>Traditional Research Studies</i>
Finding, analysis, and implementation	Specify how information about problems or needs will be analyzed		Solution identification phase	Determine the best data collection methods	Findings and analysis
Result identification	Implement the needs analysis project	Implementation (delivery)	Intervention phase	Collect data and analyze data	
	Evaluate the results, draw conclusions, and note issues for future interventions	Evaluation	Feedback and evaluation phase	Interpret and draw conclusions from the data and compare conclusions with stated objectives	Summary, conclusions, implications, and recommendations
Communication and defense	Present results to key stakeholders and establish an action plan for solving problems and meeting needs			Document results and communicate results to key decision makers, stakeholders, and influencers	Research defense
Source	Rothwell & Cookson, 1997	ADDIE model 1997	Burke & Litwin, 1992	Brinkerhoff, 1998	Colorado State University dissertation manual

Note: ADDIE = Analysis, Design, Development, Implementation, and Evaluation.

four of the five provide an opportunity to gather either additional background or critical information or data used in the completion of the activity or study. During traditional research studies, this is the phase where a literature review is conducted. Third, all five provide an opportunity for HRD scholar-practitioners and HRD academic scholars to design their activity or study. Fourth, each provides an opportunity to present findings and analysis. Furthermore, all four of the HRD activities provide an opportunity to implement a solution (or solutions) to their identified problem; however, traditional research studies do not typically engage in implementation, unless we want to refer to an intervention as implementation in an experimental design. Fifth, each provides an opportunity to present the results of the activity or study. Finally, each provides an opportunity to communicate results or provide an opportunity to defend the research design, population used, instrument design, data collection methods, analysis of findings, findings summary, conclusions, implications, and recommendations.

In addition to the four HRD activities discussed above, HRD scholar-practitioners engage in other activities that rely on a research approach. These include strategic planning, performance consulting, performance and causal analysis, organizational analysis, human resource planning, career and secession planning, and compensation analysis and review.

Research by Any Other Name

If research is used to improve decision making and is a common core of the four most important HRD activities, why do many traditional HRD practitioners avoid participating in the process altogether? In fact, many have an adverse reaction to the term *research*. Common responses include statements such as, “research is for academics, not practitioners” or “research is a theoretical exercise not for real-world problems” or “research is for people who have a lot of time on their hands, not for people who have to produce real results.”

This is where we (HRD academic scholars) are to blame. We have created this gulf by the way we approach research. For example, most academic research includes formal committees; specific and exacting chapters that must be written; required forms to be approved at all levels in the university; human subject committees with the power to delay, deny, and destroy one’s research enthusiasm; heated debates over research design and methods; formal defenses of the research that are often inquisitions rather than informed dialogue; and exacting written specifications in the final document that only the most precise back-room editor can remember. Further, some academic scholars contend that research must be painful or otherwise is not very good. To prove this point, think about the most recent research conference where some poor naïve researcher presented his or her paper only to be torn apart by the academic wolves in the audience. No learning occurs in this type of an exchange except to avoid this type of activity at all cost in the future.

We have formalized research and overcomplicated it to such an extent that many HRD practitioners think research is a mysterious ritual that only sage academics can perform. This is evident in the fact that we have created our own language and symbols in order to conduct research. We use terms like *hypothesis*, *trustworthiness*, *statistical analysis*, *member checks*, *chi-square*, *ANOVA*, *selective coding*, *correlation*, *confidence level*, *sample size*, *transferability*, *population*, *thematic analysis*, *ordinal data*, *unobtrusive observation*, *inferential statistics*, and *literature review* that have meaning to us but not to those who try and use our research findings. Quite simply, we have created our own “Tower of Babel.” This is the biblical metaphor that indicates a time when confusion reigned as a result of specialized “culturalization.” When this occurs, people from different perspectives (traditional HRD practitioners and HRD academic scholars) fail to communicate or maintain a common language, which leads to isolation and people operating from a narrow philosophical perspective. When the organizational Tower of Babel exists, people are prevented from working across philosophical lines to achieve desired results such as “leading the HRD profession through research,” which is the mission of the Academy of Human Resource Development (AHRD).

Recommendations

There are several strategies that HRD academic scholars can implement to address these barriers. First, we can begin teaching research in a practical manner so that it is used to improve decision making in organizations. Second, we can inform traditional HRD practitioners that participating in HRD activities (e.g., analysis, design, implementation, or evaluation) relies on a research approach to achieve desired outcomes. Third, we can demystify research by communicating that it is an everyday activity, fully realizing that some research projects are more complicated and complex than others, although the process and outcomes remain primarily the same. This includes the phases used to identify problems, gather additional information or perspectives, gather and analyze data, and provide recommendations, conclusions, and implications that help improve decision making within organizations and help individual professionalism. Fourth, we need to accept the reality that most if not all traditional HRD practitioners have the ability to understand, conduct, and consume research, provided it is presented in a manner that is useful and practical. This will require us to present research findings in a way that informs practice rather than expecting busy and overburdened traditional HRD practitioners to discern it for themselves. Finally, we should tear down our Tower of Babel by making every effort to communicate in terms that are useful, meaningful, and mutually beneficial. Eliminating the above barriers will encourage traditional HRD practitioners to use research in their daily practice. This enables them to become HRD scholar-practitioners who embrace research daily.

Conclusion

Because “leading the HRD profession through research” is the mission of the AHRD, we need a host of research-minded and -oriented HRD practitioners and academic scholars to lead the charge. We do not need to continue to deepen the gulf between us by making “research” the issue that keeps us apart. Both communities must work in concert to produce quality research that informs HRD practice and encourages future HRD research. Further, we need to encourage traditional HRD practitioners to embrace research because it is the common core of every HRD activity. By doing so, traditional HRD practitioners will improve their deliverables and provide value-added solutions to their organizations, which will improve their credibility, influence, and professional position. Finally, the more traditional HRD practitioners that we convert into HRD scholar-practitioners, the more we can influence the field of HRD, its practices, and outcomes. When this occurs, “leading the HRD profession through research” can be realized.

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