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A Media Perspective on HRD

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The problem and the solution. Media perceptions of HRD matter. Corporate identity works in the context of corporate mission, corporate visual image and corporate reputation. These are applied to the HRD field here and illustrated with a content analysis of instances of HRD in six major newspapers in the UK and US. The paper concludes that branding and cultivating the right media perception of HRD is essential to attracting the right personnel, enhancing the field's reputation, maintaining relevance and cultivating growth.

Keywords: HRD brand; content analysis; identity; image; media; reputation

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As a discipline, HRD is at an important stage in its growth and maturity. One of the core challenges facing HRD is improving the accessibility of the field. The extant literature identifies the constituents served by HRD (Garavan, McGuire & O'Donnell, 2004; Rambler & Brache, 1995) and the various agendas served in each case (Antonacopoulou, 1999; Wognum & Ford Lam, 2000), yet little attention has focused on how the HRD construct is perceived by the general public and in the media. In a media-conscious age, cultivating the right media perception is essential to attracting the right personnel, enhancing the field's reputation, maintaining relevance and cultivating growth.

Does HRD need broader exposure? That HRD serves a useful purpose and makes an effective strategic contribution to organizations is now well established (Garavan, 1991; Torraco & Swanson, 1995; McCracken & Wallace, 2000; Heraty & Morley, 2000). However, some commentators may argue that it is too soon to

discuss marketing and branding the HRD field given differences of opinion on how HRD is to be defined (Lee, 2001; McLean & McLean, 2001; Weinberger, 1998), ongoing research on HRD's theoretical base, and moves towards the professionalisation of the field (Lynham, 2000; Torraco, 2004; Wang and Holton, 2005). Exposing the HRD construct opens up several possibilities regarding the future development of the field. Brooks, Nafukho & Herrington (2003) argue that advertisement and branding processes can result in closer links between HRD scholars and practitioners and help bridge the disconnects that exist in the practitioner, industry and academia vocabularies regarding HRD skills and competencies. Gotsi and Wilson (2001) argue that a strong brand and reputation can enhance value, influence membership in the profession, act as a quality assurance mechanism and encourage greater levels of loyalty and participation.

This paper examines public perceptions towards HRD, as a 'brand' as they are currently portrayed in the print media. In particular, it explores how HRD has been written about through performing a content analysis of six prominent newspapers from the UK and US (Financial Times, Guardian, The Times, Wall Street Journal, New York Times, Washington Post) over a period of 10 years. The intended contribution is to examine how HRD is currently perceived and to identify the potential that exists for enhancing the HRD 'brand'.

The Professionalization of HRD

The discipline of HRD has made significant progress over a relatively short period of time. Ruona and Gibson (2004) trace the evolution of HRD since the term was coined by Nadler in 1970 and argue that the primary focus of HRD currently revolves around creating a knowledgeable, competent, agile, and reflective workforce that utilizes learning to capitalize on emerging opportunities. Tensions

exist within the field over issues such as whether individual or organizational learning needs take priority; whether individuals have freedom to learn or whether learning is a structured and control oriented process; whether learning is emergent or determined; and whether learning is essentially about integration or introspection. At a broader level, there exist concerns regarding the status of the field within organizations and public recognition of the field itself. Addressing the challenges facing HRD, Ruona, Lynham & Chermack (2003) argue that HRD needs to move towards professionalization and embrace standards of practice and a certification policy. Likewise, Abbott (1998) suggests that university degrees and other credentializing programs are becoming critical to the preparation of HRD professionals and enhancing the reputation of the field.

Profession development is a gradual ongoing process of continuous improvement. However, it is marked by the transition through several phases. Warzynski and Noble (1976) identify five stages in the process of professionalization: the identification and performance of a service in response to a pressing social need; the establishment of university-based courses for the acquisition of the specialized knowledge and training necessary to perform this service; the formation of a professional association; the adoption of a code of ethics to regulate the conduct of members and the legal licensing and certification of members.

In examining the five stages set out by Warzynski and Noble (1976), it is clear that the profession of HRD has achieved a lot in its short existence. In the first instance, Nijhof (2004) argues that as a result of studies (most notably McLagan & McCullough, 1983; Rothwell, 1996) a set of roles and competencies for HRD practitioners have been clearly defined and articulated. HRD is recognised as an important organizational response in the shift from training needs to learning needs and the increasing influence of knowledge management. Secondly, the growth of

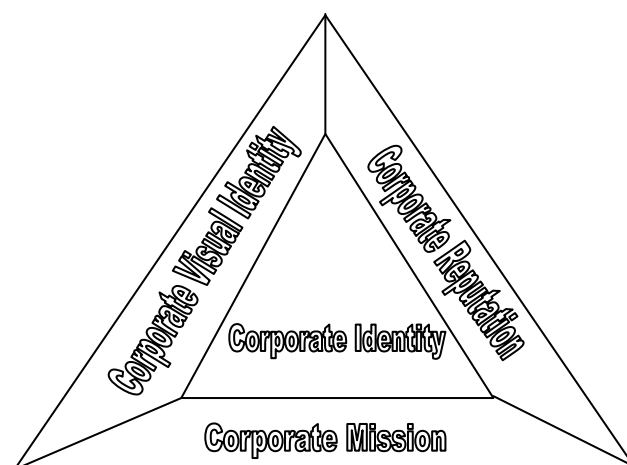
HRD as a discipline and profession has been mirrored by the growth of undergraduate and postgraduate programs in HRD (Giberson and Tracey 2004; Desimone, Werner & Harris, 2002). Such programs are focused on delivering the technical knowledge and on-the-job skills required of graduates to deliver effective strategic interventions that improve organizational and individual effectiveness. Third, the formation of the Academy of Human Resource Development (AHRD) has been essential to its continued growth and development. A study by McGuire and Cseh (2004) established that 79% of respondents identified the formation of the academy as the single most important milestone in the development of HRD. Fourth, Hatcher's (2004; 2002) work on ethics has helped ensure that HRD has a solid foundation based on strong values and morals. The adoption of *Standards on Ethics and Integrity* (AHRD, 2000) by the Academy affirms the importance placed by the academy on delivering ethically sound HRD interventions and practices. Finally, the issue of licensing, certification and accreditation is becoming increasingly important for the HRD profession. However, much remains to be done in this area. Critically, Chalofsky (2004) argues that the AHRD needs to address questions of quality control and accreditation urgently in order to firmly secure its own future.

Key to professionalization and accreditation are processes related to the marketing of the HRD brand. Branding today is used to create an emotional attachment to products, companies, types of learning and even disciplines, such as HRD. Martin, Beaumont, Doig & Pate (2005) argue that HR academics may have overlooked the branding-HR relationship in encouraging greater research in this area. At an organizational level, the branding of HRD programs marks an increasingly discernible trend. Shaw (2005) examines the power and value attaching to the Motorola University brand in China and concludes that the branding of training makes a powerful statement to business partners regarding issues of quality and

reliability. Likewise, Maxwell and Lyle (2002) argue that Hilton Hotels' branded HR strategy "Esprit" has communicated a series of values and expectations to employees on encouraging higher levels of service quality. A key conclusion from this stream of research is that HRD branding offers a useful vehicle for emphasising the core attributes of HRD and strengthening relationships with key HRD partners and stakeholders.

The concept of branding recognizes that organizations can reach their audience in a number of ways. Davis (2000) argues that brands represent a set of promises, which imply trust, consistency and a defined set of expectations. Likewise, Keller (2003) suggests that brands provide the promise of sameness and predictability. Underpinning branding is communication and marketing of corporate identity (Balmer, 2001). Westcott Alessandri (2001) maintains that corporate identity works in the context of corporate mission, corporate visual image and corporate reputation. Figure 1 displays a pictorial representation of the relationship between these three concepts.

Figure 1: Constituent components of HRD Corporate Identity



The following subsections examine the concepts of corporate mission, corporate visual identity and corporate reputation as these relate to the overall

identity of the HRD profession. The key role of the Academy of HRD as the professional body charged with advancing the HRD profession across the world is also considered.

Corporate Mission

Identifying the corporate mission is the first stage in the creation of a clear distinct organizational identity. Bart, Bontis & Taggar (2001) argue that a corporate mission should capture an organization's unique and enduring purpose. Strong (1997) argues that the mission provides a statement to all stakeholders of what the company stands for related to its purpose, image and character. Moreover, it legitimizes the organization's existence and provides the context for an organization's activities.

The usefulness of mission statements has been subject to much debate in the literature. Campbell and Tawadey (1992) argue that the mission is made real only when it affects behaviour and guides people's actions. Likewise, Germain and Cooper (1990) argue that mission statements are useful instruments if they succeed in sensitizing employees to the core purpose and values of the organization. Matejka, Kurke & Gregory (1993) suggests that mission statements need to be operationalized in order to serve a useful purpose and they propose that mission statements should be clearly communicated and reinforced through the organization's reward system so as to build direction, speed and shared commitment. For their part, Bart and Bontis (2003) argue that the corporate mission statement represents the cornerstone for major strategic planning initiatives and the launch-pad for setting organizational objectives. As well as setting the tone for organizational climate and culture, they argue that the organization's mission defines a series of stakeholder relationships that drive organizational priorities and intellectual capital development.

Mission statements need to be narrow enough to be meaningful, yet wide enough to embrace all of an organization's constituents. According to Kogut and Zander (1993), organizations can be conceptualised as a series of social communities with sets of idiosyncratic knowledge. Empowering these communities to capture external knowledge will enhance the competitive capabilities of the organization (Cohen & Levinthal, 1990) allowing it to build upon the mission towards achieving its strategic intent (Hamel & Prahalad, 1989). In other words, in realising their distinctiveness, organizations need to retain a sense of identity in striving to achieve business related goals.

The mission of the Academy of Human Resource Development is to encourage the systematic study of human resource development theories, processes, and practices; to disseminate information about HRD; to encourage the application of HRD research findings, and to provide opportunities for social interaction among individuals with scholarly and professional interests in HRD from multiple disciplines and from across the globe. Consequently, the role of the Academy as the leading association for HRD professionals is viewed as one for the furtherance of HRD theory and research, but also to provide a meeting place for HRD scholars and practitioners within a multicultural environment.

Corporate Reputation

The reputation of an organization critically affects its relationships with both its internal and external stakeholders. Roberts and Dowling (2002) define corporate reputation as "the perceptual representation of a company's past actions and future prospects that describe the firm's overall appeal to all its key constituents when compared to other leading rivals." Dowling (1993) argues that organizations need to project consistent images to their internal and external stakeholders and take into

consideration the communication role that organizational members have in transmitting their image of the organization. He argues that an organizational member's images of the organization are influenced by the vision, culture, formal policies as well as internal marketing and media activities of the organization. Moreover, it is argued that through strong organizational imagery, individuals internalise the core values, norms and beliefs of the organization (Mael & Ashforth 1992; Stuart 1999).

Engaging in a partnership type relationship can be extremely beneficial to the organization's long-term interests. Bennett and Gabriel (2001) view corporate reputation as an antecedent of organization-member closeness and member commitment. Indeed, they argue that the closeness that develops enhances the stability, durability, predictability and longevity of relationships such that members are reluctant to change affiliations. Turnbull, Ford & Cunningham (1996) argue that long-lasting relationships lead to risk aversion, high switching costs, increased loyalty and market concentration resulting in a few powerful players. In outcome terms, Achrol (1997) suggests that closeness and trust can lead to greater information exchange, joint problem solving, greater levels of motivation and higher levels of overall organizational satisfaction.

Reputation has an important strategic role in gaining competitive advantage and relational capital (Dierickx & Cool 1989; Barney 1986; Fombrun & Shanley 1990). DeCastro, Saez & Lopez (2004) argue that corporate reputation can facilitate more productive relations with both the media and the wider community. They argue that media relations can play a critical role as trigger or enabler of relational processes beyond the frontiers of the organization. Martin, Beaumont, Doig & Pate (2005) suggest that reputations are increasingly formed by the business press, such as the rankings of best place to work and industry press ratings of organizations and that

these can affect individual perceptions. In this regard, Michell, Reast & Lynch (1998) suggest that reputation represents an important element of trust because it affects cognitive perceptions of quality. Indeed, research by Pharoah (2003) suggests that corporate reputation is critical in talent recruitment and retention.

The reputation and standing of the Academy of Human Resource Development is growing in stature. Membership of the academy currently stands at almost 700 and has increased considerably over the past few years. Growth has also been experienced in the membership of the University Forum for HRD (Europe) and the Asian chapter of the Academy of Human Resource Development. A series of sessions at the 2006 Academy of Human Resource Development sought to further enhance the reputation and standing of the Academy through greater involvement and participation of HRD practitioners.

Corporate Visual Identity

Corporate visual identity is a critical component of an organization's overall identity and covers aspects such as name, logos, colors, typeface, stationary and slogans. Like an individual, each organization or brand has its own identity, conveyed through its visual identity. Christensen and Askegaard (2001) argue that corporate visual identity refers to the reception of communication efforts by the external world and more specifically to the general impression of the organization held in common by a relevant group in the organization's external surroundings. They maintain that while identity is essentially something that is organised and sent from an organization to its external world, an image is something which emerges beyond the organization's formal boundaries and eventually is sent back to the organization via external analyses. For his part, Boulding (1973) argues that images signify a mental representation of reality and portray a model of our internal beliefs and

understandings of a phenomenon or situation. Increasingly, key organizational actors recognize that possessing a positive corporate visual identity is fundamental to growth (Melewar & Saunders, 2000) and as a reflection of its future ambitions. According to Chernatony and McDonald (2003) fifteen percent of a brand concept is recognized through its visual aspects, highlighting its significance. Cheney and Christensen (1999) suggest that symbols become important signifiers of belongingness for organizational members. They argue that images and symbols also assist the organization in its quest for visibility and credibility in a cluttered and sometimes hostile environment. Both Van den Bosch, deJong & Elving (2005) and Fombrun and Van Riel (2004) identify the key dimensions underpinning corporate visual identity: visibility, distinctiveness, transparency, authenticity and consistency. They argue that corporate visual identity provides a valuable means of reinforcing good corporate reputation through corporate and marketing communications. Markwick and Fill (1997) believe that corporate identity can be seen as a means of encouraging an organization's key stakeholders to perceive the corporate entity in a clear and positive way. The concept of corporate visual identity involves communicating a company's visual identity through its publications (Melewar & Saunders, 2000).

The acceptance of HRD as an intangible social construct (Sambrook, 2000) renders the process of achieving a recognizable and acceptable visual identity for HRD and the HRD community more difficult. The fact that HRD can be said to be socially constructed does not mean that HRD does not actually exist. What it proposes is that HRD does not have a 'being' which is separate from the way in which actors make sense of it. The "Globe" icon that symbolises the Academy of Human Resource Development is derived from the mission of the academy and promotes a culture of inclusiveness across national boundaries speaking to the

ambition of the academy to become the premier global organization for HRD issues (Swanson & Holton, 2001, p. 58).

Methodology

The objective of the study was to examine public perceptions towards the HRD brand as they are currently portrayed in the print media. In particular, it explores how HRD has been written about through performing a content analysis of six prominent newspapers from the UK (Financial Times, Guardian, The Times) and US, (Wall Street Journal, New York Times, Washington Post) over a period of 10 years from 1996 to 2005. These newspapers were selected as they are considered to be quality broadsheets and are the top three listed quality broadsheet newspapers in the ABC newspaper circulation index for the UK and USA for December 2005. Indeed, the Financial Times and Wall Street Journal are considered the leading business newspapers in the UK and US respectively. An online search of all six newspapers yielded a total of 225 hits for the terms "Human Resource Development" and "HRD" and a content analysis was then conducted. Kassarian (1977, p. 10) defines content analysis as "a scientific, objective, systematic, quantitative and generalizable description of communication content". Following Krippendorff (1980), a coding mechanism was developed for application to the data collected. After the first phase of coding, questionable points were discussed by the authors and new coding rules introduced either being better specified or rewritten. To ensure inter-coder reliability, a data sample of 10% was checked by the authors to ensure that the codification of the qualitative data was consistent with the agreed coding mechanism and that the codified data was entered correctly. Both Brooks, Nafukho and Herrington (2003) and Bartlett and Porter (2002) argue that while content analysis is

a well-established social science research methodology, its use in the field of HRD has been limited.

Results

The analysis identified four key themes by which HRD is discussed in the print media (Table 2). HRD is most commonly discussed in relation to its practical application within organizations. Within this category, HRD is explored in relation to training and development, learning, and the role and operation of the HRD function. A number of the articles in this category discuss the role of HRD as driving organizational change and expansion. HRD is viewed as having a critical role in empowering change, particularly in cases of mergers and acquisitions. Several articles reported upon the operation of corporate universities and their provision of education, training and HRD. This may perhaps indicate a growing awareness of the corporate university concept. The second most commonly discussed category, personal profile, examines HRD as it relates to a named individual. Newspaper articles in this category focus on HRD practitioners or individuals connected with the HRD community. The articles are in essence split between those that detail someone who currently is involved in the field of HRD, be it in a HRD functional role, or as a HRD consultant and those who were involved in the field while alive. Obituaries of individuals connected with HRD were found in both US and UK newspapers. References to named individuals acting as “Minister of HRD” were found in several articles, particularly those dealing with Asian issues. Somewhat surprisingly perhaps, no references to named HRD academics were found in any of the articles examined.

Table 1: Key Themes Emerging from the Content Analysis

| | UK Newspapers | US Newspapers | Total |
|----------------------|---------------|---------------|-------|
| HRD Practice | 73 | 43 | 116 |
| Personal Profile | 44 | 56 | 100 |
| Economic Development | 63 | 21 | 84 |
| HRD Education | 21 | 25 | 46 |

Note: Multiple categorisations were permitted

Economic development is also a popular theme to emerge from the analysis. Most articles in this category consider the role that HRD continues to play in the strong economic growth of South East Asian economies. Such analyses provide support for the arguments advanced by Zidan (2001) and Porter (1990) in recognising the role HRD plays in the competitiveness and societal development of nations. The final significant category of HRD education included articles on types of HRD courses available as well as duration and financial costs of such courses.

Table 2: Situational Context of HRD

| | UK Newspapers | US Newspapers | Total |
|---------------|---------------|---------------|-------|
| Asia | 24 | 14 | 38 |
| Africa | 8 | 0 | 8 |
| Europe | 105 | 0 | 105 |
| North America | 1 | 73 | 74 |

The situational context of HRD (Table 2) explores the milieu within which HRD is discussed within national newspapers. Perhaps unsurprisingly, national newspapers tended to focus on HRD issues as they related to the local environment – hence UK newspapers reported on HRD developments in the UK and Europe, while US newspapers focused on North American issues (mainly US issues, but in two instances, Canadian HRD issues were discussed). Both UK and US newspapers reported on the effect of HRD in Asian economies, particularly in relation to funding for HRD initiatives and economic development, with UK newspapers providing some coverage to HRD issues in Africa.

Table 3: Coverage of HRD over 10-year period

| | UK Newspapers | US Newspapers | Total |
|------|---------------|---------------|-------|
| 2005 | 9 | 10 | 19 |
| 2004 | 5 | 9 | 14 |
| 2003 | 11 | 5 | 16 |
| 2002 | 10 | 10 | 20 |
| 2001 | 12 | 10 | 22 |
| 2000 | 7 | 5 | 12 |
| 1999 | 13 | 9 | 22 |
| 1998 | 25 | 11 | 36 |
| 1997 | 19 | 6 | 25 |
| 1996 | 19 | 7 | 26 |

Table 3 clearly demonstrates that UK interest in the HRD concept clearly peaked in the late 1990s. While there may be many reasons for this occurrence, one explanation may be that it coincides with the strong economic growth rates experienced at this time. It is clear also that the low incidence of discussion of HRD in national newspapers supports the case for stronger branding and marketing of HRD in the media.

Conclusion

Growing a strong, distinctive and viable brand is crucial to the development and maturity of the HRD profession. Branding raises its profile and generates a sense of ownership and loyalty among HRD stakeholders. A brand is recognised as being both a valuable resource and a mark of distinctiveness. An audience's consciousness of the HRD field can be raised by the projection of a standardized corporate identity and the strong development of a corporate reputation.

One of the key findings in the study relates to the limited diffusion of the HRD concept in the print media. The low number of hits over a ten year period indicates that much remains to be done in raising the profile of HRD and its value to organizations and individuals. The mission and purpose of HRD needs to be more

strongly articulated if HRD is to become accepted and recognised within organizations and society. Moreover, HRD needs to demonstrate its relevance and capacity to add value in an increasingly challenging business environment.

The role of HRD internationally produced some interesting results. The growth of HRD in Asia and Africa is reflected in the study findings. Within both US and UK newspapers, many articles discussed the role that HRD plays in furthering economic development. HRD is viewed as a critical factor in achieving sustainable national competitive advantage and this is reflected in the importance placed on HRD at a governmental level through the establishment of specific ministries for human resource development.

On a positive note, the HRD professions greatest ambassadors are its people. If we remove the personal profile category from our analysis, we are removing almost half of all the results generated. This clearly indicates that it is through those involved in the profession that information about HRD is being spread in the print media. Therefore profiling of individuals key to the profession, be they practitioners or academics should be recognized as key to the branding process and embraced as such. Indeed, the results suggest that academics need to adopt a more proactive role in spreading the HRD message in the print media.

The findings of the study provide several clear ideas regarding the future development of the field of HRD. Following Warzynski and Noble's (1976) framework, moves towards standards of practice, accreditation and quality control as advocated by Ruona, Lynham and Chermack (2003) and Chalofsky (2004) would appear to be the logical next step in the professionalization of the field. This would clearly increase the profile and reputation of the field within the wider business community. Current efforts at establishing greater scholar-practitioner links will also

be beneficial in ensuring that accreditation and certification processes are perceived as serving a useful function within organizations.

In conclusion, to achieve sustainability and growth and to attract the right personnel, HRD needs broader exposure. This means that greater attention needs to be paid to how HRD is marketed and branded. Spreading the mission, forging a strong reputation and cultivating a robust visual identity will undoubtedly lead to increased identification with the field, act as a quality assurance mechanism and encourage greater levels of loyalty and participation. In a media-conscious age, HRD neglects its corporate identity at its peril.

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