



Personal growth for a professional career

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There is a long and vexed debate about whether or not HR is a profession, but it doesn't really matter who wins the argument. There are qualities that characterise a profession that HR practitioners should want to have. At the core of the claim to be a "professional" is the idea that the practitioner has the skills, knowledge and insight to deal with complex situations in their area of expertise. It is this aspiration that defines the scope of professional development for HR practitioners.

A "professional" (Gold, Rodgers & Smith, 2002) has mastery of a body of knowledge, along with the mental framework to make sense of it and apply it in a variety of circumstances. The professional has acquired the situational knowledge to be an expert, and their expertise is more than what can be replicated by following a manual.

There is also a social dimension to professions. Clients trust professionals to adhere to standards of quality and ethical behaviour, and to exercise independence and discretion in addressing clients' issues. And the credibility of professionals is dynamic. In a changing environment, particularly with the vastly increased availability of information through the internet, professionals sustain the rationale for their existence.

The internet may suggest a lessened need for professionals, as their specialised information is now open to all. But if the client still suffers the same difficulty in making decisions, if the application of the knowledge in concrete contexts is still complex and uncertain, the need for professionals will persist. Moreover, if professionals are active in innovation and knowledge creation, they sustain their basis for credibility by changing the very nature of their professional work.

Professional development (PD) is the key to consolidating the basis for the HR practitioner's credibility, but to be effective, PD has to combine two sorts of learning. One sort of learning concerns technical information (eg employment laws, information systems, recruitment practices) and problem-solving, while the other concerns a wider-ranging skill – "problem-setting" (Schon, 1983). The latter skill is the ability to immerse oneself in a complex situation and determine what is important and how to frame it and generate constructive outcomes.

What is the need for professional development?

Professional development can be defined as the systematic maintenance, improvement and broadening of knowledge and the development of personal qualities necessary for the person to sustain their relevance and effectiveness at work throughout their working life (adapted from Kennie, 2000).

The factors in the business environment that have increased the need for continuing PD are well-known. They include:

- rapid and ongoing changes in technology that have reduced the lifespan of job knowledge
- organisational restructuring and changes in job responsibilities
- the increasing scope of standards and compliance
- competitive pressures on organisations
- competitive pressures on individuals in the labour market (no job is for life).

Frequently changing job roles and challenges mean that HR practitioners must learn continually, and simply performing a job efficiently is not sufficient to stay abreast of change. A UK study (Rothwell & Arnold, 2005) found that HR practitioners valued PD because of the changing nature of their work; they wanted to enhance their employability and job prospects, and improve their job performance.

Rothwell and Arnold's study found that the HR practitioners who valued PD the most were motivated by commitment to the HR profession more than by a felt need to remain employable. They found no significant correlation (positive or negative) between practitioners' level of education and their attitude towards PD. Rather, they concluded that "interest in PD is likely to be an expression of a person's positive and involved approach to professional work rather than a deficit-driven way of catching up". Their findings also suggest that many HR practitioners have not embraced the call to take charge of their own career development.

How do HR professionals pursue professional development?

In Rothwell and Arnold's study, the most favoured PD activities were informal and concerned with the person's current job and organisation. Such activities included reading of journals, sharing knowledge and discussing with colleagues, spontaneous learning arising from work activities and action learning through projects. Formal activities such as participation in training courses, membership of project committees, attendance at PD events and undertaking qualification-based study rated lower.

Given that HR practitioners participate in PD for a variety of reasons, Rothwell and Arnold argue that PD should explore broader options, addressing individual needs and catering more for informal learning approaches. The potential of new learning media such as online learning, information repositories and peer-to-peer dialogue should be exploited.

The role of reflection in learning was not investigated in the Rothwell and Arnold study, but the authors observe that without reflection you can accumulate experiences without learning much. Reflection is necessary in order to give context and meaning to experience. The capable practitioner has a mental framework that makes sense of work situations and enables the person to generalise from their experiences, as Schon (1983) had maintained.

Effective PD, according to Kennie (2000), has to consider more than completion of a given number of hours spent at courses and seminars. These are input measures, whereas the ultimate measure of effective PD is its output, which can be summed up as performance improvement and personal growth. To achieve and assess performance improvement, Kennie advocates the following process:

1. Where have I been (in relation to any PD need), ie what is my previous knowledge base and/or experience?
2. Where am I now? (what are my current strengths and weaknesses in relation to the need identified)?
3. Where do I want to be (what level of skill/knowledge do I want to obtain)?
4. How will I get there (what learning plan/strategy will I adopt)?
5. How will I know when I get there (what evidence could I provide to illustrate improved performance)?

This is to look at PD from the individual's perspective. From this perspective, the question of "how to get there" includes both formal and informal activities. It may include structured training and seminars as well as work-based projects. It may include the use of competency models as well as mentoring, coaching and self-paced elearning. It may include individual study as well as participation in group activities.

From a professional organisation's perspective, the pertinent questions are:

- What structured activities are most likely to meet the needs of members (given their range of needs and motivations)?
- How can the organisation support the PD of individuals (ie how can it help them to determine their needs and pursue an appropriate development path)?

- How can the organisation best address the diversity of members (eg senior/novice, with/without formal qualifications, geographically dispersed)?
- How can the organisation support the social aspects of learning?
- How can the organisation make best use of new technologies to offer resources and opportunities to members for PD?
- How can the organisation support critical and reflective thinking about HR practices?

Creating a new model for professional development

The current environment for the HR practitioner offers the possibility of developing a new model for PD. What are the elements that can lead to the development of a new model?

1. The amount of information and its availability over the internet indicate that it is not possible to know everything or, if you did, to keep that knowledge up to date. Thus, what is more important is (a) to know who to ask or where to obtain reliable information and (b) to have developed a robust mental framework that makes sense of your professional area. The latter skill enables you to identify what information is important. HR practitioners need to contemplate how this shift affects traditional approaches to PD.

2. Peter Senge (2004) suggests we need a new approach to learning:

“Reactive learning is governed by ‘downloading’ habitual ways of thinking, of continuing to see the world within the familiar categories we’re comfortable with..... Regardless of the outcome, we end up being ‘right’. At best, we get better at what we’ve always done. But different types of learning are possible.....”

This echoes Schon’s distinction and it prompts us to examine what has been discovered about the process of learning over the last 20 years. There are many aspects of learning that affect the shape of PD, such as how experts approach decision-making, how the memory functions, what the differences are between learning cognitive material and learning that deals with the emotions, and how learning transfers from the training context to the workplace.

3. Web-based technologies have spawned a plethora of new options for computer-based learning. The self-paced module is established and has its value. Such modules can now incorporate sound, video and complex graphics and they have revolutionised access to learning over distance. New applications continue to emerge and are being extended to mobile tools.

The kinds of information that can be made available and the kinds of interactions that can occur – person-to-resource (computer) and person-to-person – are multiplying so rapidly that HR practitioners need to take stock of what they would like to do with the technology. It has to serve people and their PD goals, and it has to observe learning principles. Kaplan and Ashley (2004) make a number of suggestions about the use of technology to drive “next-generation” PD.

4. Whatever the new model of PD looks like, it must incorporate community. Community is important for many reasons. For a start, social interaction is an aspect of most learning. Community is also the milieu from which mentoring and coaching arise. And community creates continuity of learning beyond structured events.

The concept of “communities of practice” has been developed to describe the informal and ongoing way in which professionals share information and insights, help to solve each others’ problems and support each others’ work. Members of such communities share a common set of values and have an interest in contributing to their knowledge domain. The existence of communities of practice serves to foster learning-sensitive environments in their workplaces, which is what the HR practitioners in Rothwell and Arnold’s study seemed to be saying they valued the most – the opportunity to learn informally at work, and the support to maximise their learning.

Smart learning

Formal training to be an HR professional is only the beginning of the journey to competence and expertise. Most of the real learning comes through experiences in the role. Hence the importance of PD. But individual differences in learning style mean that it would be counter-productive to prescribe a "best practice" route to competence.

A more productive approach is to have a grasp of the range of experiences that can foster learning and to look for the learning possibilities in all experience. This includes activities that are individual and collective, formal and informal, work-based and off-site, and open to the use of computer technologies (Cheetham and Chivers, 2001).

Underpinning these activities should be a knowledge of techniques to get the most learning out of experiences. Professionals should be autonomous, self-directed learners, with skills such as self-assessing learning needs, observation, reflection, awareness of their learning style, mind mapping and adopting different perspectives. Learning how to collaborate with others to learn and share is a significant skill in PD, and the ability to articulate lessons learned. Finally, professionals should see it as their obligation to facilitate the learning of other professionals and to act as a worthy role model.

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