SOCIOLOGICAL ISSUES IN HUMAN RESOURCE DEVELOPMENT

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Contents

Summary

The article outlines five sociological issues facing organizations in the global Human Resource Development context. The decreasing influence of institutions throughout the world requires increased resources on learning at all levels of organizations. Globalization promises to increase the spread of economic and rationalist values such as efficiency, replication and measurability. The emergence of global subcultures seeks to challenge the status of globalization as a dominant institutional organizing process. The ability of Human Resource Development professionals to respond to these changes will rely on their ability to adapt to these changing institutional structures. Adaptations to changes in global organizations include responses to the changing demographics and values of the workforce, increased professional specialization, better equipping of the workforce to learn independently of formal learning programs, learning in a team

environment, greater sensitivity to diversity, and the engagement of the workforce in developmental or long-term learning programs. The implications of technology as a sociological force for control are briefly presented and the implications of technology for HRD discussed. Sociology, being a primarily Western lens for viewing change, is a useful but limited framework for understanding the implications of change for sustainable systems.

1. Introduction

The purpose of this chapter lies in analyzing HRD as an institutional practice and its role in creating and sustaining meaning for its members within a global context. The practice of HRD is seen as creating and perpetuating a series of institutional values that are tied to larger prevailing social norms. This chapter shares the belief of Neilsen & Rao's (1990) that organizational development practices can be construed as a form of social convention or etiquette that arises from the need for greater coordination in the face of increased complexity. This form of etiquette, which might be called the etiquette of HRD, arises in response to the "increasingly intricate patterns of interdependence to be attended to, more complex workflows to monitor and implement, and demands for more fine-grained planning and calculation, and more strategically contingent thinking across multiple time frames".

A new set of institutional values based on efficiency, calculability, predictability and control through technology have begun to prevail. Further, it is argued that, while globalization has constricted many economic and social activities, globalization has actually increased diversity of opinions and beliefs and that this increased diversity provides unique challenges to the profession of HRD. The response to this growing diversity is best accomplished by increasing the diverse means by which learning is perpetuated throughout an organization.

A plan for HRD professionals in responding to these new demands is suggested. Sociologist Peter Berger (1967) provides a starting point for exploring these sociological changes. Berger points to two trends that have had a major impact in global change: the breakdown of traditional institutions and the surfacing of multiple perspectives.

2. Breakdown of Traditional Institutions

The first sociological issue lies in the breakdown of institutions and the devaluation of traditional social forms of organization, such as government, family, church and education. This "de-institutionalization" reflects a general movement away from organized social institutional forms of dealing with social change. Until fairly recently, individuals often relied on long-standing institutions to answer difficult questions about the nature of uncertainty in life.

In particular, these social institutions helped both individuals and the greater society deal with change. Institutions dealt with social change by establishing a set of ground rules for making sense of experience. Essentially, institutions helped people learn from the past to make sense of new and changing circumstances. For example, as an

individual grew and changed throughout her life, she went through a series of rites of passage that signaled movement into different phases of life. These phases represented different relationships between the individual and the society. These rites of passage had two functions. On the social level, rites of passage helped the society maintain its sense of tradition and provided a means to establish and assess an individual's status within the society. Societies relied on rites of passage to mark significant changes in a person's life, beginning at birth and continuing on through death, with several transitions in between. Rites of passage also serve a psychological function by allowing individuals effectively to "know their place" in a society. There appear to be a few universal rites of passage such as marriage and puberty rites. It's important to note, however, that while certain rites of passage seem to manifest themselves in most cultures around the globe, there are wide differences in the specific ways that various institutions and cultures sanction these changes.

Traditionally, social institutions, and organized religion in particular, played an important role in sanctioning these rites of passage by regulating the rules that bound these rites. For example, some cultures regulated the age at which a person could marry or the age at which a boy could make the transition. These institutions provided means for determining both continuity and change in these rituals based on prevailing social and economic circumstances. Sociologists Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann (1966) observe that societies have become less and less reliant on these traditional rites of passage. In fact, they argue that many societies have become suspicious of, and have almost completely rejected, many of these rites of passage. This suspicion of institutions was evident in the 1960s and 1970s radical movements in the United States. Many of these movements were inspired by the idea that traditional institutions, especially the government and related institutions such as the military, could not be trusted. This institutional skepticism, however, reaches beyond the United States and has begun to surface in places that have traditionally relied heavily on social institutions.

3. Emergence of Multiple Perspectives

The second major social issue lies in the fact that the breakdown of traditional institutions as guides to social norms works hand in hand with another set of growing changes: the emergence of multiple, often competing, perspectives. Since society no longer relies primarily on traditional social institutions to help it through periods of change, members of society begin to seek answers elsewhere. As institutional status withers away, so the theory goes, individuals within that society begin to face a series of choices as to what is considered normal. When institutions were responsible for interpreting norms, individuals had little choice in matters. Individuals had little choice in whom to marry, what to do for a living, what kind of lifestyle to follow and what kind of worship to partake in. As institutional authorities crumbled, so did their monopoly on choice. What has emerged, according to Berger, is a marketplace of choices, where a series of cultural enterprises compete for the attention of a cultural consumer. Walter Truett Anderson has written provocatively about this idea. Anderson challenges the notion of "globalization", the rise of one homogenous global culture. Rather, Anderson claims that what is occurring is a fracturing of traditional local customs and beliefs into a variety of "global subcultures". These global subcultures act like international guilds that provide individuals with a sense of belonging to a community, albeit one where

individuals seldom, if ever, interact face to face. Anderson writes, "Global subcultures such as those of science, business, and diplomacy also flourish and create new patterns of international society. Many people are more at home in these placeless subcultures than in any traditional culture or nation or tribe". Interestingly, global subcultures increase the diversity of opinion faced by a society. Surely, globalization has increased communication around the globe like never before, but, ultimately, according to Anderson, globalization increases diversity and choice, increasing pluralism within a global context.

This notion of "pluralism" -- that there are many different, often competing, cultural ideologies -- challenges the social monopoly held by traditional institutions like churches, governments, and the family. Individuals act more like cultural customers, each trying to find a set of social rules that fits their particular circumstances.

4. Shift to an Information-Based Economy

The third and possibly one of the most significant and pervasive issues facing the HRD professional is the shift from an industrialized economy to an economy based on information. Sociologist Daniel Bell was one of the first to provide a systematic account of this shift. He outlined five components of the change from an industrial to an information economy.

> 1) Change from being a producer of goods to a producer of services.
> 2) Increases in professional and technical workers, what Bell terms the professional and technical class.
> 3) The centrality of knowledge as the driver for innovation and social policy.
> 4) An orientation towards the future with the ability to control and manage risk, particularly as it relates to social forecasting.
> 5) The creation of technology to aid in making decisions that allow for the systematic organization of complexity.

These points are important for HRD professionals because they denote renewed emphasis on measurement, increased reliance on information management and assessment, and a closer relationship between those who create and implement knowledge in organizations. In this information-intensive environment, success will lie in the skills of those who can manage and create knowledge. Human capital will be the primary currency and its central challenge lies in creating a sufficient skill base for workers, providing access to advanced educational opportunities and integrating specialized skills in response to diverse organizational demands.

5. Increased Rate of Change

The fourth sociological issue impacting HRD emerges from the information-intense economy and lies in the increased pace of change in organizations and society. Institutions have become obsessed with time. This obsession can be traced back to the industrial revolution and the work of Fredrick Taylor. Taylor attempted to devise a science of management that saw time as a resource, much like other natural resources such as steel and coal. In Taylor's way of thinking, time should be managed with the

same controls as these other material resources. Interestingly, in the information economy, where human capital is the most important asset of an organization, time becomes even more important because it's the only "real" resource that can be managed.

Social observer James Gleick compiled a list of how speed has impacted everyday organizational activities. From 24-hour customer service to stock market day trading, to computer processing time, speed impacts all aspects of organizational life. Organizations have adopted their own kind of Moore's law, a term coined by Gordon Moore, an early computer scientist who predicted that computing power would double every eighteen months. Glick says that organizations must follow an equivalent philosophy: organizations must double the amount of information they can process every eighteen months. Thus, information increases in both rate and amount, increasing the overall pace in which organizations much deal with change. This is important to HRD professionals because of the need to find new methods to assist individuals in dealing with the accelerated pace of change.

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Biographical Sketch

D. Christopher Kayes (Ph. D. Organizational Behavior, Case Western Reserve University) is Assistant Professor of Organizational Behavior and Development at The George Washington University. He holds an MBA from Butler University and a BA in Religious Studies and Political Science from Indiana University, Bloomington. His research and teaching focus on the process of transforming individual experience into group knowledge. This includes studies of groups and teams, management learning, organizational sensemaking, experiential learning and learning styles, and critical thinking. His research has appeared in journals such as *Academy of Management Learning and Education, Journal of Management Education,* and *Small Group Research*, as well as book chapters in *Research on Groups and Teams* and *Conversational Learning: An Experiential Approach to Knowledge Creation.* His current thinking focuses on the relationship between language, learning, and organizations.