How do HRD professionals and business managers interact in organizing HRD activities?

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Abstract
Human resource development (HRD) has traditionally been seen as the main driver behind people-centered developmental activities such as learning and development, organization development, and career development. However, the role of HRD professionals as the main stakeholder has been questioned as more and more people-centered development activities have been integrated into a broad range of leadership and supervisory roles within the organization. The question arises: How do HRD professionals and business managers interact in organizing HRD activities? Building on structure and actor theories as a theoretical foundation, the study combines deductive and inductive data analysis of semi-structured interviews to review the roles of HRD professionals and business managers involved in organizing HRD activities in six different organizations in the USA. Our findings show that while training does not appear in any of the HR-related job titles, the term “training” is more common in business managers’ titles describing their link to HRD activities. When organizing those activities, HRD professionals and business managers engage extensively in emergent partnering structures. While some HRD professionals are the main actors in some learning networks, business managers drive HRD activities in others. We discuss the commingling of actors and its impact on the learning network. The paper closes with a discussion of...
research limitations, future research, and implications for HRD practice.

KEYWORDS
actor theory, interaction with business managers, organizing HRD activities, structure theory

1 | INTRODUCTION

Human resource development (HRD) has traditionally been seen as the main driver behind people-centered developmental activities such as learning and development (L&D), organization development (OD), and career development (CD) (McLagan, 1996). Many of these activities used to take place in formal structures, such as instructor-led training, company-wide coaching programs, or annual CD initiatives, whether in physical or virtual spaces (Lundgren & Poell, 2020).

At the same time, the role of HRD as the main stakeholder has been questioned as more and more people development activities have been integrated into a broad range of leadership and supervisory roles (Cappelli & Tavis, 2018; Whittaker & Marchington, 2003). Engineers, marketers, retail store managers, accountants, sales managers, and product developers are all tasked to develop people and teams, next to executing their functional responsibilities. Numerous studies have analyzed the involvement of line management in Human Resource Management (HRM) (Renwick, 2003; Renwick & MacNeil, 2002), HRM devolvement practices in various countries and contexts (Gautam & Davis, 2007; Watson et al., 2007; Zhu et al., 2008), and their resulting outcomes (Bainbridge, 2015; Perry & Kulik, 2008; Reichel & Lazarova, 2013; Sikora & Ferris, 2014), but less is known on the devolvement effects on HRD roles (Garavan et al., 2019). As more responsibility for learning, career, and organizational development is assumed by others, the relationships between HRD professionals and their organizational counterparts are shifting, and organizational roles around planning, designing, delivering, and evaluating HRD activities are re-negotiated.

Although HRD has largely adapted to sharing more of its traditional responsibility, the field has also encountered challenges and criticisms (Torraco & Lundgren, 2020). These criticisms include the lack of strategic alignment with business functions and their needs (Cappelli, 2015), bringing insufficient first-hand knowledge of work into the role (Luff et al., 2000), and difficulties in demonstrating the effectiveness and return on investment (ROI) of HRD activities (Cascio & Boudreau, 2010). The current status of HRD can be seen as problematic (Poell & Van Der Krogt, 2017) as it raises important questions around relevance and credibility (Carliner & Hamlin, 2015), and its impact on professionalization (Chalofsky, 2007).

In view of the lack of knowledge of the effects that devolvement has had on HRD roles, this study is guided by the following research question: How do HRD professionals and business managers interact in organizing HRD activities?

The purpose of answering this research question is twofold: to gain a better understanding of how HRD activities are organized in current work organizations and to explore opportunities for professional practice adjustments in the field of HRD. By speaking to HRD professionals (those who work in an HR/HRD-related function, including L&D and organization effectiveness [OE] professionals) and business managers (those who work in a business-related function, including IT, marketing and sales, finance, operations, and general management) and by capturing their personal experiences and observations of, and views on, organizing HRD activities, this study intends to contribute to a contemporary framework for analyzing how HRD activities are organized. This framework can impact the way HRD scholars and practitioners see the field of HRD, in terms of conducting research, providing strategic direction to practitioners, and teaching HRD students at a graduate level.
2 | THEORETICAL FOUNDATION

To answer the research question, we draw from various theories that help us understand elements of structure, actors, and how they interact in organizing HRD activities.

2.1 | Structure theories in HRD

Traditionally, structure theories have looked at the functioning of organizations and their learning where the organization shows up as one entity that focuses on achieving its goal. From that viewpoint, scholars have looked at structural functionalism (Stryker, 2001) in which organizational structures and systems are designed to meet the requirements of organizational functions (Van Der Krogt, 1998). Functions, such as HRD, exist to ensure the smooth running and continuation of the system. For example, the fact that HRD conceptualizes and organizes learning activities for employees of an organization can be viewed as an organizational function to keep up with changing standards and technological advancements. Scholars have also drawn on contingency theories (Fiedler, 1964; Khandwalla, 1977) to understand the role of context in shaping HRD in organizations (Garavan et al., 2019). Through this lens, organizations adopt structures that fit their internal and external environment; their structure is hence contingent on specific aspects of the organization, such as size, strategy, the organization’s life stage, the industry it operates in, and other factors. Contingency theory juxtaposes the universalistic idea of “one size fits all”; instead, a structure that matches environmental factors and complexities—the so-called “best fit”—makes the organization most efficient. In HRM literatures, contingency theory has been widely adopted to confirm the influence of contextual factors on the effectiveness of HRM practices (Abt et al., 2017; Caldwell, 2003; Farndale et al., 2010; Reichel & Lazarova, 2013). Similarly, contingency theories have been applied in different ways to the field of HRD, including a review of factors that influence HRD practice (Kuchinke, 2003), its effectiveness (Wognum, 2001), and its efficiency (Versloot et al., 2001).

2.2 | Actor theories in HRD

As a reaction to structure theories, and partly out of other disciplines, actor theories emerged that look at organizing learning from a complementary yet different perspective. In actor theories—sometimes also referred to as agency theories—the emphasis is on people with their divergent views and interests (Garavan et al., 1998; Van Der Krogt, 1998) where people act individually, in groups, in departments, and in organizations. People, whose actions shape the environment, can be seen as “actors” (Van Der Krogt, 1998, p. 160) who operate strategically (Azevedo & Akdere, 2011; Billett, 2011; Goller & Paloniemi, 2017).

Two lenses are of interest in the context of actor theories: social constructivism (Bruner, 1990; Vygotsky, 1978) and the actor politics perspective (Van Der Krogt, 1998). Social constructivism assumes that actors act in line with their motives, drives, and insights. Some action might be motivated by the individual; other action stems from collectively held beliefs. The latter manifests itself in collectively held beliefs and habits, such as the unwritten rules of organizational culture or certain rituals around an employee’s retirement. From the actor politics perspective, organizations consist of clusters of actors with divergent interests who put in place strategies in line with their own interest. These clusters of actors act very similar to political parties within their organizations, engaging in activities such as negotiations, conflict (and its resolution), and the formation of coalitions. In HRD, actor theories have been employed in different ways, including the study of self-interest of trainers for organizational outcomes (Azevedo & Akdere, 2011), considerations of individual and social agency of learners (Billett, 2011), and agency in professional L&D contexts at work (Goller & Paloniemi, 2017).
2.3 | Structuration theory in HRD: Structure and agency

Giddens (1984) usefully combines both structure and agency into one theory. In structuration theory (ST), structure and agency are in a relationship where neither exists without the other. Giddens (1984) describes how people produce their social systems while employing rules and resources—he summarizes those as “structures”—during the interaction of people (“agency”). Using routines and rituals, people reproduce these structures whether they do that knowingly—think, for example, of “best practices” postulated in many organizations—or unknowingly through taken for granted or unquestioned actions. While these routines and rituals reinforce enabling and constraining features of the social system that already exists, social structures are also subject to change because of the dynamics of people's intentional or unintentional actions. Agency and structures are in a “reciprocal relationship where neither structure nor action can exist independently” (Giddens, 1984, p. 25). When applying ST in organizational research, Giddens suggests that researchers look for moments of consensus and conflict during social interaction, noting the patterns of what is similar and what is different during those encounters.

While ST has been applied as an interpretative framework in management, organization, and HRD studies (den Hond et al., 2012; Jacobson et al., 2015; Veliquette, 2013), it has also been critiqued for its overemphasis on the individual's understanding of and contribution to those structures. Archer (1995) argues that theories that rely on individualist social methodology (such as ST) fail to adequately address and incorporate the relations, whether enabling or constraining, that exist between people and society. Archer further remarks that these theories insufficiently incorporate the impact of exterior structural factors (think, for example, of social hierarchy factors or political orientation in organizations) in those interactions. “There is no ‘isolated’ micro world—no Lebenswelt ‘insulated’ from the socio-cultural system in the sense of being uncontrolled by it, nor a hermetically sealed domain whose day-to-day doings are guaranteed to be of no systemic ‘import’” (Archer, 1995, p. 10-emphasis in original). Instead, it is worth considering a theory that combines structures with agency both at the micro and at the meso level.

2.4 | Learning-network theory in HRD: Actors, processes, and structures

The learning-network theory (LNT) combines actors, processes, and structures in a descriptive and diagnostic theory for investigating how HRD is organized in various organizational types (Campana, 2014; Davis, 2013; Edström et al., 2018; Franken et al., 2018; Gibbs, 2010; Govaerts & Baert, 2011; Harris & Simons, 2006; Li, 2017; Marsick, 2009; Mick & Greene, 2004; Pahor et al., 2008; Škerlavaj & Dimovski, 2006; Smith, 2003; van Bussel et al., 2018). The basic idea of the LNT is that depending on the (work) context, organizational actors create a range of HRD processes that over time become more fixed (i.e., turn into HRD structures), which then form the backdrop for these actors to engage in HRD processes again. Actors, processes, and structures together form a learning network, which is idiosyncratic to any one organization. For example, Škerlavaj et al. (2010) tested this learning-network perspective by conducting a social network analysis of a software development company. They found this company to have a horizontal learning network (i.e., with an egalitarian organizational structure, organic learning processes, and an open content structure), thus claiming support for the diagnostic qualities of the learning-network perspective.

Key HRD actors include for instance employees, line and top managers, and obviously HR(D) professionals. Core HRD processes are developing HRD policies, organizing learning programs, creating employee learning paths, and engaging in individual learning processes. Main HRD structures include the content structure (what do employees learn about?), the organizational structure (who does what to make HRD processes happen?), and the learning climate (how does it show what the actors value in terms of learning, e.g., creativity, accountability, reciprocity, etc.?).

Organizations have been found to differ rather substantially from one another in terms of their learning network, and also to change their learning network over time (Poell et al., 2006; Poell & Van Der Krogt, 2003, 2005). Within an organization, different actors have been shown to prefer different courses of action when it comes to organizing processes.
HRD processes and changing HRD structures (Lilova & Poell, 2019; Poell & Van Der Krogt, 2014). The learning network is the (temporary) outcome of the negotiations among these actors and depends in part on the power dynamics in the wider (work) context; HRD practitioners are often dependent on managers and employees to gain influence in the learning network (Koornneef et al., 2005; Poell et al., 2003, 2006).

While a potential disadvantage of the LNT is that it does not prescribe which particular learning network “fits” best in a particular organizational context, it has a number of advantages that led us to apply it in the present study. Most importantly, it offers one unified framework for HRD researchers to compare how different stakeholders (here: HRD professionals and business managers) interact in their unique organizational contexts. Although drawing on ST, the LNT offers more nuanced ways to theorize organizing HRD. The LNT extends ST in two distinct ways: it incorporates HRD processes besides actors and structures; it looks not only at the learning network of an organization but also at its links with the prevailing work network. A network—consisting of a web of connections and relationships between actors involved in creating processes—is a useful metaphor for describing the social fabric of an organization. The network symbolizes a perspective on organizing (Van Der Krogt, 1998). A network is made up of strategically operating actors in a “social” fabric—whether that is internal or partly external—that is created through the actors’ actions, and which fabric in turn influences those actions. The LNT yields a more detailed picture than ST does and therefore leads to a better understanding of how HRD comes to be organized by (among others) HRD professionals and business managers.

3 | METHODS

Our study combined deductive and inductive data analysis of semi-structured interviews to review the roles of HRD professionals and business managers involved in organizing HRD activities in different organizations in the USA.

3.1 | Data collection

3.1.1 | Selection of organizations and recruiting of study participants

We used purposive sampling to interview HRD professionals and business managers from the same organization. We aimed to find a handful of organizations to participate in this interview study. Upon ethics board approval, we approached 18 organizations through various personal and professional networks, held informational sessions with 12 of these to get access to 7 organizations. In our call for participation, we reached out to private, public, governmental, and non-profit organizations of various sizes. We did not approach small organizations (<250 employees) as we did not expect these to have two dedicated HR/HRD professionals that we could interview.

3.1.2 | Instrument and semi-structured interviews

We asked to conduct four to six interviews per organization, half with HRD professionals and the other half with business managers, depending on the organizational size and availability of resources, making sure that we would have “balanced sets” of interviewees. The lead author conducted all interviews, using an interview guide that included questions relating to HRD activities, stakeholder roles, and partnering as well as business needs, challenges, and criticisms as derived from literature (Torraco & Lundgren, 2020). Since interviews were conducted with different business managers, the exact wording of the questions was adjusted to the stakeholders’ contexts and perspectives. The lead author, who worked in both line management and HRD roles herself made sure that interviewees knew
about her professional experiences, which enabled cognitive access (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2016). Throughout the interviews, the lead author aimed at establishing trust between the researcher and the interviewees by enabling video for those calls that were not conducted in person, which showed the lead author in her office environment that mirrored the participants' office environment. In addition, the lead researcher offered follow-up advice on content-specific challenges discussed during the interviews. By putting these trust-building measures in place, we are confident that the collected data represents meaningful, rich, and authentic accounts of lived experiences of HRD and business managers (Anderson, 2017). We did not encounter any ethical issues or situational ethics dilemmas during the data collection process, although we are aware of the perceived power relationships between researcher and research participants, and their effects on sharing meaningful accounts of the participants' perceptions, experiences, and feelings.

Between January and April 2020 (and hence mostly prior to the global pandemic), we conducted 30 interviews across seven organizations, some in person and others via a virtual meeting platform. All interviews were scheduled for an hour, and the actual length of recorded interview time averaged at 52 min, with the shortest taking 39 min and the longest lasting 83 min. We dropped one organization—Organization 04—because of an unbalanced and incomplete set, resulting in 28 interviews across six organizations as part of this study.

These six organizations operate in diverse industries and sectors, including social services, heavy industry, automotive, consumer goods, and medical devices, and they represent both non-profit and for profit (private and public) organizations. Notably, all organizations were founded between 1801 and 1925, which means that they had a serious business track record in comparison to start-ups or some of the U.S.-based large tech companies.

3.1.3 | Transcription and member check

Our interviews were transcribed via a professional transcription service. The written transcripts which ranged from 11 to 20 pages in length, were sent back to all interviewees for a member check. Three interviewees returned the transcript with comments of clarification and/or minor edits. We emphasize the member-checking option as we believe that it helps verify fair representation and confirmability of interviewees’ voices and feedback (Choi & Roulston, 2015).

3.1.4 | Description of participants

The sample consisted of 28 professionals in different HRD and business manager roles (for details on job titles see Table 1), with more male (61%) than female (39%) participants. The average age of interviewees in our sample was 45.7 years with an average of 25.8 years in the workforce, and 13.5 years in the organization (with HRD’s average tenure of 8.1 years being much lower than their organizational counterparts who had been in the organization for 18.9 years), and 3.5 years in their current job. Participants of this study were recruited from across the United States of America, including participants from both West Coast and East Coast, the Southwest, and the Mid-West. The ethnicity of participants was predominantly white, with two Asians and one Native American. No interviewee identified as Black or African American.

3.2 | Data analysis

Our analysis process included several stages of coding along the study’s code book, re-coding, constant comparison, and peer-debriefing.
First, we reviewed our data while focusing on becoming “intimately familiar with each case as a stand-alone entity” (Eisenhardt, 1989, p. 540). The initial stage was highly exploratory, with the authors going back and forth between interview transcripts, interview notes, and—where available—additional documents.

In the second stage of our data analysis, we started applying literature-derived a priori codes from our code book to give the data some structure. We soon realized that our deductively derived code book based on Torraco and Lundgren’s (2020) conceptual paper was too narrow, and we started adding more codes that emerged inductively from the interviews to represent the depth of the data we had collected. In this stage, which combined deductive

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reference</th>
<th>Job title</th>
<th>Department</th>
<th>About the organization</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>01, Hrd01</td>
<td>Sr. Director, Learning &amp; Development (L&amp;D)</td>
<td>HRD</td>
<td>• Public company, founded in 1897, in medical devices industry with 65,000 employees worldwide</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>01, Hrd02</td>
<td>Sr. Manager, L&amp;D, Talent Management</td>
<td>HRD</td>
<td>• Company grew recently through two significant mergers and acquisitions (M&amp;As) • Central HRD department</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>01, Hrd03</td>
<td>Assoc. Director, L&amp;D</td>
<td>HRD</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>01, Mgr01</td>
<td>VP, Research Center Ireland</td>
<td>R&amp;D</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>01, Mgr02</td>
<td>Sr. Director Program Management</td>
<td>R&amp;D</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>01, Mgr03</td>
<td>VP, Finance</td>
<td>Finance</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>02, Hrd01</td>
<td>VP, Inclusion &amp; Diversity, and Talent</td>
<td>HRD</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>02, Hrd02</td>
<td>Director, Global L&amp;D</td>
<td>HRD</td>
<td>• Private company, family-owned, founded in 1886, in consumer goods industry with 15,000 employees worldwide • Central HRD department</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>02, Mgr01</td>
<td>Sr. Director, Global Customer Marketing</td>
<td>Marketing</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>02, Mgr02</td>
<td>Principal Engineer and L&amp;D Leader</td>
<td>Business</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>03, Hr01</td>
<td>HR Manager, Business Partner (HRBP)</td>
<td>HR</td>
<td>• Private company, family-owned, founded in 1925 (in Germany), in automotive parts manufacturing; 12,000 employees worldwide, 500 employees in the USA • No HRD department</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>03, Hr02</td>
<td>Sr. Talent Acquisition Specialist, HRBP</td>
<td>HR</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>03, Mgr01</td>
<td>Product Development Trainer</td>
<td>R&amp;D</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>03, Mgr02</td>
<td>System Engineering Manager</td>
<td>Engineering</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>05, Hrd01</td>
<td>VP, L&amp;D</td>
<td>HRD</td>
<td>• Non-profit organization, founded in 1902, in social services with 4000 in this independent regional branch • Branch doubled in size within last 10 years • Branch has an HRD department</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>05, Hrd02</td>
<td>Director, L&amp;D</td>
<td>HRD</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>05, Mgr01</td>
<td>Area Manager, Training Stores</td>
<td>Retail</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>05, Mgr02</td>
<td>VP, Mission Services</td>
<td>Services</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>06, Hrd01</td>
<td>HR, Organization Effectiveness (OE)</td>
<td>HRD</td>
<td>• Private company, employee-owned, in heavy industry, founded in 1801 with 310 employees in the USA • 200-year old manufacturer with proud history and tradition (“We still supply product for the U.S. Constitution”) • OE department was established over last 10 years, reporting directly to the VP of HR</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>06, Hrd02</td>
<td>Behavior Management Leader, OE</td>
<td>HRD</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>06, Hrd03</td>
<td>VP, HR</td>
<td>HRD</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>06, Mgr01</td>
<td>Spare Operator, Lead and Trainer</td>
<td>Operations</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>06, Mgr02</td>
<td>Superintendent</td>
<td>Operations</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>06, Mgr03</td>
<td>Quality Manager</td>
<td>Quality</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>07, Hr01</td>
<td>Director of People Resources</td>
<td>HR</td>
<td>• Non-profit organization, founded in 1902, in social services, with 650 employees in this independent regional branch • Branch has no HRD department</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>07, Hr02</td>
<td>Employee Engagement Manager</td>
<td>HR</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>07, Mgr01</td>
<td>Contact Center Operations Manager</td>
<td>Operations</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>07, Mgr02</td>
<td>Store Team Leader</td>
<td>Retail</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Abbreviations: HRD, human resource development; L&D, learning and development.
and inductive analysis, we followed key principles of Gioia et al. (2013) to develop first-order concepts from descriptions found in the interview transcripts.

Moving to the third stage of analysis, we started to develop higher, second-order themes which focused on the relationships between first-order concepts. This stage helped us to recognize some patterns across the data set. We focused on combining second-order themes into theoretically relevant, aggregate dimensions (Gioia et al., 2013) along the LNT.

For each organization, we analyzed several aspects of the work and learning networks (processes, actors, and structures). For processes, we looked at the activities that business managers and HRD professionals conducted to make sure that the work and learning processes would actually occur and work hand-in-hand (Poell, 2007). To better understand key actors, we focused on their job titles (Garavan et al., 2019) as well as their views on the needs, challenges, and criticisms that exist vis-à-vis HRD (Torraco & Lundgren, 2020). To get an idea of the HRD structures forming the organizational context to actors’ activities, we included data on the different roles of stakeholders (Lilova & Poell, 2019; Poell & Van Der Krogt, 2014), on partnerships that existed or unfolded (Garavan et al., 2019), and the level at which HRD activities were mainly organized: strategic, tactical, or operational (Yorks, 2005). Together, and related to one another, these aspects provide a picture of the learning network in each of the organizations under study. We employed the LNT framework for our study because it allows us to compare the ways in which different stakeholders, such as HRD professionals and business managers, interact in the idiosyncratic context of the learning network within their organizations using one unified framework.

In our fourth stage, we conducted a cross-case analysis (Yin, 2014), exploring similarities and differences in HRD needs, challenges, criticisms, and resources while applying the LNT theoretical framework to our study. The summary of relevant interview themes from balanced sets of HRD professionals and business managers from one organization were pooled together and compared to relevant themes from interviewees of HRD/business manager pairs of another organization, hence comparing one idiosyncratic learning network with another. By doing so, we found that some organizations were more similar and others more dissimilar in the way that HRD activities are organized (as captured in Table 3). Wherever possible, we aimed at presenting the outcomes of our analysis using direct quotations and thick descriptions of experiences that convey a sense of the study participants and their environments.

4 | FINDINGS

Our research question asks about the interaction between HRD professionals and business managers in organizing HRD activities. We use the LNT framework to highlight various elements that describe how actors engage in work and learning processes that create structures, which are then interpreted and evaluated by their actors. Our findings are presented here to start with an overall analysis, before going into a case-by-case comparison.

4.1 | Actors: What is in their job titles?

Reviewing HRD professionals’ job titles, we find that “L&D” is commonly used, along with “Talent” or “Talent Management” (see Table 1). For HRM-related job titles, we find that the description is either broad, for example, “HR Business Partner,” or very specific, for example, “Talent Acquisition Specialist” or “Employee Engagement Manager.”

For business manager job titles, the picture is more diverse as we interviewed supervisors and leaders from all functional parts of the organization. Noticeably, four business managers held job titles that hinted toward HRD-related activities, including “Learning & Development Leader,” “Area Manager, Training Stores,” “Trainer,” and “Product Development Trainer.” We notice that while the word “training” does not appear in any of the HR/D-related job titles, it is more common within business manager roles to describe their link to HRD activities.
This review of job titles helps setting the scene while introducing different actors who participated in this study. We will return to our key actors when we present the findings on needs, challenges, and criticisms.

4.2 | Processes: What HRD activities are discussed?

Moving on to processes, we looked at HRD activities that form part of the interaction between HRD professionals and business managers (see Table 2).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity (first-order concepts)</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Dominant occurrences (org)</th>
<th>Code count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 L&amp;D for leadership</td>
<td>Formal learning activities for supervisors, managers and leadership</td>
<td>01; 03; 05; 07</td>
<td>86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Classroom delivery</td>
<td>Courses delivered in classroom settings</td>
<td>01; 02; 03; 06; 07</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Coaching</td>
<td>Activities around performance coaching (internal or external)</td>
<td>01; 02; 03; 05; 06; 07</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Career development</td>
<td>Activities around career development for employees, including career conversations, career pathways, and career planning</td>
<td>01; 03; 07</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Onboarding</td>
<td>Activities around onboarding of new employees</td>
<td>03; 07</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 Virtual delivery</td>
<td>Courses delivered in virtual settings</td>
<td>01; 02</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 L&amp;D for employees</td>
<td>Formal learning activities for employees</td>
<td>01; 03; 04</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 On-the-job training</td>
<td>Training delivered on-the-job, for example to manufacturing or call center employees</td>
<td>06; 07</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9 Recruiting</td>
<td>Activities around talent acquisition</td>
<td>03</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 Skill development</td>
<td>Development of functional skills and competencies of employees</td>
<td>02; 05</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11 Training for tools</td>
<td>Courses delivered to employees on engineering, process, and quality software and tools</td>
<td>03</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12 Talent management</td>
<td>Activities around performance reviews and succession planning</td>
<td>01</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13 Train-the-trainer</td>
<td>Activities around developing trainers for course delivery</td>
<td>01; 02</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14 Sales/retail training</td>
<td>Functional training on topics of sales and retail</td>
<td>02; 07</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15 Compliance-based training</td>
<td>Functional training on topics of employment law, including sexual harassment</td>
<td>03; 07</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16 Behavioral management technique</td>
<td>Activities based on behavioral science to address safety and quality improvements</td>
<td>06</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17 Mentoring</td>
<td>Activities around mentoring (peer-to-peer or leader-to-employee)</td>
<td>01; 05</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18 Project management training</td>
<td>Functional training on topics of project management</td>
<td>01; 03</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19 Continuous improvement</td>
<td>Activities in organizational effectiveness that use a continuous improvement approach</td>
<td>06</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20 Safety training</td>
<td>Functional training on topics of worker safety</td>
<td>06</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Abbreviations: HRD, human resource development; L&D, learning and development.
We noticed that some activities were discussed extensively, including formal learning activities for supervisors, managers, and leadership as well as courses delivered in classroom settings and activities around coaching. Other activities were discussed in subsets of organizations, for example, activities around CD or onboarding. Yet another set of activities was specific to idiosyncratic learning networks, such as training for tools (Organization 03) or behavioral management techniques (Organization 06).

4.3 Structures: How do HRD professionals and business managers partner?

As part of the interview guide, we asked both HRD professionals and business managers about their roles in organizing HRD activities. We collected 32 different role identifications (first-order concepts), which we compared and clustered into second-order themes. We noticed that both HRD professionals and business managers spoke extensively about the role of being a “partner” when organizing HRD activities.

We, therefore, investigated the role conception of working as partners in more detail and identified four emergent partnering role structures (see Table 3).

The first role structure deals with strategic partnering. In this context, HRD professionals are seen as enablers (01, Mgr03) to help business managers meet their business goals. Paired with this achievement orientation, a consultative approach (05, Mgr02) is preferred that combines business needs and functional L&D expertise.

The second role structure centers on co-designing HRD activities. HRD professionals are actively invited by the business manager to exchange thoughts and discuss curriculum choices (05, Mgr02). HRD professionals put infrastructures in place that support these exchanges, by embedding development partners in business functions so that they are more accessible for business leaders (02, Hrd01).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Role structures</th>
<th>Selected quotes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Strategic partnering          | “Our HR partners are enablers to help us get to where we need to be.” (01, Mgr03, 35801–35907)  
“I think it’s that fine line of how much are you consulting and versus telling. And [VP of L&D] has done a fantastic job of saying, okay, well, what is it that you need to accomplish?” (05, Mgr02, 11937–12138) |
| Co-designing                 | “When I got this curriculum, I sent it to [VP of L&D]” and said “What are your thoughts? Do you think we could use some of the principles in this to get our staff to start thinking differently about just the conversations that they were having?” (05, Mgr02, 8892–9138)  
“We were relying upon lots of [external] consultants who would say charges $50,000 to develop a pretty simple e-learning course. I’ve changed the approach: I have a development partner imbedded in Commercial. They routinely meet with the business leaders.” (02, Hrd01, 17490–17950) |
| Co-delivering                | “I developed a relationship with a manager L&D. Really, his capability, his strongest capability is probably delivering. He’s a lifetime L&D guy. Perfect for me because I’m not. I just get the business, have some capability there, understand products, business, and the industry in which I live.” (02, Mgr02, 13797–14248)  
“I would say it’s definitely a partnership. We both support each other...We certainly work with the OE team to make sure that [on-the-job training] is covered.” (06, Mgr02, 20681–20987) |
| Sustainability alliance      | “The learning is absolutely crucial to that because then lots of strategies that we have followed in the past like doing a road show of the world and then only to find out that half the people move after a year and the learning does not stick. So when we are partnering with the L&D team now in a more strategic way to make sure that the learning is sustained.” (02, Mgr01, 2977–3332)  
“I love collaborating like with people like [VP of L&D] and the L&D team. And I love making sure that we have significant impact on our community.” (05, Mgr02, 23012–23180) |
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristics</th>
<th>01</th>
<th>02</th>
<th>03</th>
<th>05</th>
<th>06</th>
<th>07</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Selected activity</td>
<td>Classroom-based leadership development using the leader-teacher model</td>
<td>Product training for professional cleaning business distributor schools</td>
<td>Technical training in engineering product development</td>
<td>Functional training for store managers and retail employees</td>
<td>On-the-job training on safety and continuous improvement</td>
<td>Leadership development program “Leap into Leadership” for managers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Main approach (main actor)</td>
<td>Strategic (HRD)</td>
<td>Tactical (Mgr)</td>
<td>Operational (Mgr)</td>
<td>Strategic (Mgr)</td>
<td>Tactical (HRD)</td>
<td>Tactical (HR)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Degree of needs fulfillment</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Main challenges</td>
<td>People, method, measurement</td>
<td>Method, management</td>
<td>Management, method, people</td>
<td>People, method, management</td>
<td>People, method, management</td>
<td>People</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Criticisms</td>
<td>1. Strategic alignment</td>
<td>Annual strategic review</td>
<td>5-year plan</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>5-year plan</td>
<td>Annual strategic review</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2. First-hand knowledge</td>
<td>Prior work experiences, Listening to understand, Participating in management meetings</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Prior work experiences</td>
<td>Prior work experiences</td>
<td>Prior work experiences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3. Demonstrating effectiveness</td>
<td>Aspirational ROI goals, senior leadership engagement</td>
<td>Business case, Kirkpatrick</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Aspirational ROI goals, employee retention</td>
<td>Safety, quality and productivity measures, employee engagement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>After action reviews, employee retention</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resources</td>
<td>Internal and external</td>
<td>Internal and external</td>
<td>Internal and external</td>
<td>External</td>
<td>External</td>
<td>Internal</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The third role structure deals with co-delivering HRD activities. This structure was applied in both classroom delivery (02, Mgr02) as well as on-the-job learning settings (06, Mgr02) where HRD professionals and business managers partner up to conduct a workshop together or to implement a new process on the job.

The fourth role structure includes topics of learning effectiveness and training transfer, summarized here as forming a sustainability alliance for impact. Finding strategic ways of making learning stick (02, Mgr01) and producing an impact on the community (05, Mgr02) describe the sustainability partner structure.

Using the LNT terminology, these four roles (strategic partnering, co-designing, co-delivering, and sustainability alliance) represent structures that contribute to organizing HRD activities in the learning network.

4.4 | Actors: HRD needs, challenges, and criticisms

This section reports back on how key actors (i.e., HRD professionals and business managers) interpret and evaluate the processes and structures in the learning network. While the previous sections described our findings across all cases, this section focuses on one organization at a time. The following elements are included in each organizational profile: a main approach (and who drives it as the main actor), an evaluation of HRD need fulfillment, a description of main challenges, and a review of three criticisms derived from the literature (see Table 4).

4.4.1 | Classroom-based leadership development using a leader-teacher model (Org01)

Organization 01, characterized as strategic in its approach and with the HRD function as its main actor, uses a leader-teacher model to roll-out classroom training, including leadership development. Business managers can sign up to become leader-teachers to receive training from the HRD team before engaging in classroom delivery at various locations globally. Most of the organization's instructor-led classes have two instructors, one from HRD and one leader-teacher, hence partnering in a co-delivery structure. The benefits are described in this quote: “And that's really the richness of the instructor-led part is hearing those stories and experiences in the business in the region. Functional experience that helped give practical examples to the people in the class” (01, Hrd03, 27975–28247). When asked about their HRD need fulfillment around leadership development using the leader-teacher model, business managers are very satisfied.

This learning network does not come without challenges in areas including people, method, and measurement. Linking to the example of the leader-teacher model, the organization involves external facilitators when they do not have enough internal capacity, as the pool of leader-teachers is shrinking (people). These external vendors are not always attuned to the leader-teacher model (method), and there is also a pull to deliver more courses virtually (method). The organization has aspirations in the area of demonstrating effectiveness but struggles to show the impact of its leadership development programs (measurement).

The organization engages in an annual strategic review and they actively participate in setting aspirational ROI goals that are not yet tracked with data. When asked about first-hand knowledge of the work itself, HRD professionals in this organization spoke about their prior work experiences in functional roles, such as marketing and IT, and that they use listening as a method to understand business needs: “If I'm teaching a three-day class with managers, I'm listening and I'm learning from them every single moment” (01, HRD02, 32986–33092). A business manager offered an alternative view on demonstrating effectiveness: “I think a more intangible metric and designator would be: How many of your senior leaders are still investing their time teaching these courses? How many of them are leaders as teachers, right? How many of them are willing to give up three days of their business time?” (01, Mgr01, 38896–39397). This view highlights the importance of leadership engagement as a measure of effectiveness.

In terms of resources, this organization makes use of internal resources such as shared services, the organization's leadership team, and HR colleagues as well as external resources, such as Degreed, other L&D vendors, ATD, and universities.
4.4.2 | Sales training for professional cleaning business employees (Org02)

Organization 02 has recently changed the way HRD activities are organized: “Every kind of division had their own development resources. And over the past few years we've centralized those” (02, Hrd01, 7926–8109). This means that business managers now have to request help from the centralized teams in order to partner on initiatives, like the sales training for professional cleaning business distributor schools highlighted in this profile. As part of the organization's core business functions, this type of functional training is mainly driven by business managers, with some support from the HRD function. The main approach is perceived as tactical. Central resources are scarce, which means that HRD needs are perceived as only partially fulfilled.

The change from decentralized to centralized HRD resources has come with some challenges. As one of the HRD professionals explained: “We don't want it to be the order taker and we don't always want it to be in the firefighting mode and definitely we don't want it to be the one behind the eight ball” (02, Hrd02, 28566–28884), showing the challenge of how HRD and their functional clients interact (method). Being a private, family-run business that acquired the professional cleaning solutions company 5 years ago, comes with a set of management challenges around roles and accountability (management).

In terms of business alignment, the HR and HRD functions engage in a 5-year strategic plan that is updated regularly. First-hand knowledge is acquired by listening to understand, and by participating in management meetings. While the HRD function in Organization 02 acknowledges that they could do more in terms of HR analytics, they do engage in writing business cases for new L&D programs and also evaluate learning effectiveness using the Kirkpatrick evaluation framework: “to look at pre and post measures around key behaviors that we want to see, first of all, declaring what the behaviors are” (02, Hrd01, 30347–30709). The business managers are more critical of this same question of demonstrating effectiveness: “it's hard to put a business number and ROI around learning, very hard. I haven't seen it so far” (02, Mgr01, 31839–32059).

Resource-wise, stakeholders in Organization 02 make use of internal resources, such as the organization's leadership team and HR colleagues. They also tap into external resources, including team assessment vendors, Gartner reports,¹ and Workday learning modules.²

4.4.3 | Technical training on engineering product development (Org03)

While managers are responsible for functional training of their teams, specific tool-based training such as product development training for engineering program managers is organized centrally via the technical trainer in Organization 03. This role is based in the program management department, with some links to the HR department. The more developmental aspects of HR seem to take a backseat in this organization: “[IT’s just something that a smaller company like [EMPLOYER] does not have” (03, Hr01, 12224–12359). Given this situation, business managers who are the main actors in this operational approach to organizing HRD, feel that their needs are not fulfilled. Although there is another subsidiary in the USA, and the mother company with headquarters (HQ) in Germany, not a lot of L&D support is offered from within the organizational network.

Challenges include the lack of resources (people) to help with developmental activities in business functions and across the organization: “the way that we are set up right now, there's not enough people dedicated to it... I think that we really will need to hire someone who is an expert in that area so that we can take our training and development to the next level (03, Hr01, 19102–19563). This lack of people resources is coupled with a lack of strategic direction in HRD (management). Because of rapid growth—the organization tripled over the last 10 years—business managers and HR professionals feel that support structures have not grown sufficiently. Within product development, the delivery of technical training used to be very instructor-centric, which posed another challenge (method). To counter this challenge, the technical trainer decided to attend an instructional design course to develop future programs with more active participation structures.
Since Organization 03 does not have a dedicated HRD department, we did not gather sufficient evidence to respond to the questions on strategic alignment, first-hand knowledge of the job itself, or demonstrating effectiveness.

In terms of resources, the organization involves business function colleagues (also from HQ) to support training activities (internal). The HR department has occasionally hired in external instructors to train on specific topics, such as presentation skills, and they have also used external vendors for leadership development programs.

### 4.4.4 Functional training for store managers and retail employees (Org05)

Despite this organization being non-profit delivering social services, they also run a thrift retail operation, which is the largest chunk of the organization in terms of work structure. Here, the approach to organizing HRD is strategic, with business managers as the main actors. The retail operation includes a number of training stores as well as training programs for store managers and retail employees. The business manager responsible for training stores makes sure that managers-in-training are being adequately trained. As part of his role, he coordinates several on-the-job retail trainers who report to the HRD function, describing their interaction positively: “I think that now, more than ever, we have a great partnership with our L&D team” (05, Mgr01, 33832–34080). In Organization 05, retail training is matrixed between business management and HRD.

HRD’s engagement with retail training has grown over recent years: “In the past few years, there have been a lot more opportunities for development with employees” (05, Mgr01, 21072–21221). As much as these more structured programs for store managers are appreciated—some span over several weeks—they are also perceived as impractical given that retail operations and work processes need to remain staffed. The HRD needs are seen as partially fulfilled where a more “à la carte style teaching” (Mgr01) for shorter modules is seen as a future curriculum improvement.

Paired with the high turnover rate in retail, and hence the constant need to onboard and train new people, the length of current retail training programs is seen as one of the challenges (people): “If you have to make a decision because you're down 80 store managers, and you're going to send people to a 10-day retail leader development program for a new hourly team member who’s being promoted to a manager, that's probably not going to happen” (05, Mgr02, 34095–34508). Establishing ROI and showing impact have been voiced as another challenge (measurement). Despite the fact that the CEO is in favor of expanding the L&D portfolio, engaging more leaders as teachers have been difficult (management).

In terms of strategic alignment, HRD engages in a 5-year plan with their business partners, a work process that is described as rigorous (05, Hrd01). Retail programs are delivered by former store managers, which ensures that there is good knowledge of the work itself. One business manager has a keen interest in working in the field of HRD, hence strengthening the link between the functions: “My actual goal is to one day move over to the L&D department” (05, Mgr01, 34506–34737). Measuring impact is currently stated aspirational ROI goals, however, another indicator is used as a proxy for success: employee retention, especially in retail.

Organization 05 enjoys the strength of a large HRD department that is also networked with other branches of this non-profit; if they need additional support they look externally for resources, such as ATD, HBR, Franklin Covey, and other L&D vendors, including universities.

### 4.4.5 On-the-job training on safety and continuous improvement (Org06)

The main focus of the OE team—the team that drives HRD-related activities in a tactical way—lies on the implementation of safety and continuous improvement training, that is supported by a behavioral management philosophy. Training happens “hands-on” in the workplace and on-the-job with very few interventions in classroom settings. As one OE team member explains, “my role is to write documents, training documents, for knowledge retention and knowledge transfer purposes” (06, Hrd01, 233–615).
The collaboration with the OE team receives great appreciation from the business managers interviewed, “The OE team worked really, really hard to change our safety culture” (06, Mgr03, 23163–23399), and the relationship with HR resembles a mutual partnership: “We both support each other” (06, Mgr02, 20681–20987). Overall, Organization 06 viewed itself as “a very close-knit group right from our CEO down to our newest hire” (06, Mgr02, 3686–3814).

One challenge is the slow adoption of new procedures in the workplace (people): “You have people that are pretty set in their ways or just don’t want to do it any different way” (06, Mgr01, 5092–5228). Because the organization seeks to apply standard work methods, they emphasize another challenge which is around the variability in execution (method). The varying degrees of commitment of functional managers to support change is seen as another challenge (management).

The OE department, led by the VP of HR, engages in an annual strategic review with the business. Organization 06 has recently introduced a new strategic concept that is driven by each functional department head and supported by the OE team. Prior work experiences, including line management roles in manufacturing (06, Hrd01), IT (06, Hrd02) or utility operations (06, Hrd03), make the OE team a welcomed partner in the learning network. The OE team also engages in listening while delivering on-the-job training. At the same time, their functional counterparts are open to learn more about HRD. One business manager completed an Executive Master’s degree in HRM as she regards labor relations as an important part of her job (06, Mgr03). To track program effectiveness, Organization 06 created multiple scorecards and dashboards that show safety, quality, and productivity measures. They also track employee engagement.

Supporting resources are mainly sought externally. The organization has been working closely with an external coach and consultant who has provided leadership training and guidance on behavioral management.

4.4.6 | Leadership development program for managers (Org07)

The HR team in Organization 07 is a small team that does not have a separate HRD department. Most tactical HRD interventions are delivered by the HR team that is led by the Director of People Resources, for example, the Leap into Leadership and other leadership development programs. At the same time, business managers are responsible for providing their own training to employees in their respective functional areas, including onboarding and continuous training in the retail operations, and call center training in the contact center.

The HR team is aware of the importance of relationship building with different organizational functions: “I have been intentional about my networking with those business partners. And I am working to have regular meetings in which my goal is how can I—either it’s myself and or my team—continue to support you in your business functions or operational functions, whatever that might be” (07, Hr01, 2778–3063). Business managers feel that their HRD needs are largely fulfilled.

When asked about challenges, only one aspect stood out in this organization: the availability of resources (people). This challenge has two parts: the number of people who are available to design and deliver HRD-related activities, and the ability to make employees available for those programs while keeping operations sufficiently staffed.

Leadership development forms part of the strategic plan that this non-profit branch in social services develops on an annual basis: “We have a plan that we put out every year that has specific things outlined, so hiring for success, how do you coach commitment, things like that, but also trying to figure out what new things are coming up and how can I make sure our supervisors are aware” (07, Hr02, 3078–3446). Similar to other organizations, prior work experiences of HR team members facilitate their connection to the various business functions. In the case of the Director of People Resources, her previous roles included managing the contact center and running mission services for the organization.

When evaluating program effectiveness, Organization 07 makes use of after-action reviews where an HR team member audits a specific program and engages in a feedback session with the team of instructors afterward. In
addition, the organization believes that tracking retention rate is a good indicator of their overall people-orientation and success.

The senior leadership team, functional colleagues within the branch, and HRD colleagues from other branches function as the main internal resources for HR stakeholders of Organization 07.

4.5 | Comparing learning networks across organizations

Comparing HRD activities and who drives these activities, we find a mixed picture across the organizations interviewed. For example, strategic and tactical L&D of leadership is mostly driven by HRD professionals as the main actors, who partner with business managers as subject matter experts in co-delivery (Organizations 01, 06, and 07). Process, product, and technical training, on the other hand, form part of more tactical and sometimes operational CD and are more often driven by business managers or technical trainers—note how the terminology switches to “training” here—with HRD professionals partnering in co-design (02, 03, and 05).

Looking at those organizations where business managers describe themselves as the main actors in driving HRD activities, their satisfaction with this is lower and they voice that HRD needs are only partially or not at all fulfilled. For example, not having access to a more robust leadership development program that is available cross-functionally is seen as a deficit (03). Similarly, a lack of flexible L&D approaches, like more micro-learning “à la carte”-type courses for employee development to integrate better with operational and staffing needs is a reason for dissatisfaction (05).

When comparing the sorts of challenges that participants of this study talked about, we notice that management, people and “how to?” (method) challenges were raised across organizations, while challenges around technology, budgets, and measurement were less pronounced. Although not seen as a challenge, the question of how to measure HRD outcomes and ROI was discussed extensively. Employee retention (05 and 07) and employee and leadership engagement (01 and 06) were mentioned as proxies for demonstrating effectiveness.

HRD professionals and business managers both seem invested in L&D approaches and first-hand knowledge of the job itself. While these two actor positions, HRD professionals on the one hand and business managers, on the other hand, seemed two separate entities at the outset of this study, we observed many instances of professional experience overlap when we enquired about HRD activities and how they are executed through emergent partnering role structures.

Looking at sources of help and inspiration that HRD professionals and business managers connect with and rely upon, we found 47 resources all together, some of which were internal resources, such as colleagues or the organization’s CEO, and others were external, such as vendors, consultants, universities or professional bodies in their field or industry. Interestingly, ATD or SHRM was not among the most mentioned or emphasized resources across all organizations. Instead, the “Top 5” consisted of individuals—internal or external—rather than organizations. These included the CEO/organization’s leadership, vendors, HR/L&D colleagues, business function colleagues, and coaches/consultants. Notably, LinkedIn as a networking platform and LinkedIn Learning as a corporate learning platform were mentioned in the “Top10” together with ATD, SHRM, and Universities.

5 | CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION

5.1 | Organizing HRD

Our research question was to explore how HRD professionals and business managers interact in organizing HRD activities. We did so by looking at the learning network of six organizations in the USA, where we talked to HRD professionals and business managers (actors) about HRD activities (processes) and how they partner with each other.
(structures) as well as the actors' views on the needs, challenges, and criticism that exist vis-à-vis HRD. Business managers turn out to be important actors in organizing HRD activities. Whether they are driving those activities or collaborating with their colleagues in HRD seems to depend on the idiosyncratic learning network of their organization. Definitional boundaries between HRD and business managers are often blurred because of the commingling of actors with shared professional interests and experiences. Partnering structures emerge as spaces of co-design and co-delivery, allowing HRD professionals and business actors alike to exchange knowledge, perspectives, and insights on HRD activities. These conclusions are elaborated upon below (Figure 1).

5.1.1 | Commingling of actors

We found that actors who collaborate through organizing HRD activities, whether they are business managers or HRD professionals, often have overlapping career paths and career interests that go across the learning and work networks. These findings change the way we think about the HRD profession and the development of HRD professionals in specific HRD academic programs (see Kuchinke, 2015 in the Advances in Developing Human Resources Special Issue on Promoting the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning in HRD), as we thought of the HRD professional career path as distinct from other business functions in organizations and educational programs. In contrast, we found that HRD professionals come from line management roles with degrees/significant work experience in business operations, marketing, or IT. At the same time, we met business managers with a master-level degree in HRM and/or with an ambition to grow into an L&D role as part of their CD. This commingling of actors with shared HRD professional interests is important as it shows the strategic significance of HRD in the learning network and perhaps even in the organization.

5.1.2 | Emergent partnering structures

We also found that partnering in the learning network manifests itself as an important role structure between HRD professionals and business managers. We described emergent partnering in four areas, including strategic partnering on new initiatives, co-designing content, co-delivering programs, and forming sustainability alliances for impact. Other studies that looked at isolated L&D roles, for example, the strategic business partner, or the training manager,
and their perceived effectiveness (see Garavan et al., 2019) have not represented this interactive reality that we observed in our study.

5.1.3 | HRD activity adoption by business managers

We observe that some HRD activities are driven more by HR or HRD professionals, and other HRD activities are driven more by business managers. What comes out on top of Table 2 for HRD professionals are activities around L&D for leadership, classroom delivery, and coaching. This finding is in line with previous studies in HRD that have found an emphasis on “traditional” delivery formats of L&D activities (Nijhof, 2004). This finding also begs the question of why HRD has not emphasized more other delivery formats, including virtual, micro, and adaptive learning, which are praised and promoted by industry bodies. For business managers, on the other hand, main processes included CD, onboarding, and functional skill development. This finding is interesting in the context of HRD process adoption, as especially CD has previously been portrayed as disconnected from the HRD mainstream (McDonald & Hite, 2015). If the CD of employees lies at the core interest of business managers and their work networks, and they feel empowered to “adopt” these as main actors for their team members, what are the implications of this transfer of process ownership on organizational life? Are business managers equipped to navigate CD processes and options as they select, develop, and promote talent?

5.2 | Theoretical implications

Besides yielding empirical insights into the interactions of HRD and business managers in organizing HRD activities as outlined above, this study offers a contemporary theoretical framework for analyzing how HRD activities are organized. We started the study drawing on structure theories, actor theories, and Giddens’ (1984) ST as well as the LNT (Poell & Van Der Krogt, 2014; Van Der Krogt, 1998) as frameworks guiding our data collection and analysis.

Structure theories on the one hand helped us see, for instance, the four emergent partnering role structures of HRD and business managers. Specifically, contingency theory allowed us to become more sensitive to the idiosyncratic nature of how HRD activities were organized in each of our six organizations, depending on its own history, development, and industry context, for example.

Actor theories on the other hand were relevant to us in pointing out, for instance, how different stakeholders (esp. HRD and business managers) come to engage in organizing HRD activities with their own backgrounds, job titles, views on HRD challenges, resources, and interests in how to solve them. Social constructivism made us aware of how such key actors interpret and evaluate the processes and structures in the learning network, while the actor politics perspective showed us how some HRD activities are driven more by HR or HRD professionals, and other HRD activities are driven more by business managers.

The main benefit of applying the ST was that it provides an understanding of how structures and actors/agency are interdependent and co-developing. Think, for example of Organization 01, where HRD professionals and business managers used internal and external resources (structures) to further their interests (agency). Out of their actions emerged new products and resources such as leadership development programs, which illustrate how agency and structure are intimately related.

A major contribution of this study is the realization that the LNT adds to our understanding of how HRD activities are organized, in two major ways, above and beyond what the (more generally oriented) ST and its predecessors can offer in this respect. First, the LNT distinguishes among actors, processes, and structures, which yields a more detailed picture than ST’s focus on structure and agency. Different actors have different views on and interests in organizing HRD activities. It is in the processes where they negotiate, fight, collaborate, and so forth, to make their
own views and interests the dominant ones in the organization. The more powerful an actor is, the more dominant their views and interests will be represented in the processes and, ultimately, structures of the learning network.

Second, the LNT distinguishes between the learning network and the work network of the organization, which again brings forward a more detailed image than ST’s focus on “the organization” per se. Where the work network is usually dominated by business managers (and employees engaged in the primary process of the organization, depending on its type), the learning network is normally more the realm of HRD professionals, and employees trying to use it for their professional and CD needs. Our study shows that it is perhaps easier for business managers to impact the learning network than it is for HRD professionals to affect the work network, although some interesting examples of partnering efforts were also observed. For example, in Organization 02 the activity of setting up the sales function for the professional cleaning products division is a good example of the work network that integrates work actors (e.g., 02, Mgr02), work processes (e.g., customer marketing), and work structures (e.g., field sales), while the learning network described employee training of those cleaning products where both work actors and learning actors partnered. Separating the two networks (and who is the main actor in each) helps to better understand how HRD activities are organized.

5.3 Limitations and future research

Reflecting on our research findings and discussion, we acknowledge that each organization’s context as the backdrop to our LNT framework and analysis should have been highlighted more. While the number of cases described here was limited to six, each organization came with a history of development and change, including mergers and acquisitions, that influenced organizational dynamics, and most certainly had an impact on how HRD activities were organized. Highlighting these context parameters does not only enrich the study, it also sheds light on differences across industries and organizational formats that might have relevance for HRD practice.

Another limitation is reflected in the fact that we did not interview non-managerial employees, due to a change in our initial research design that was affected by the global health pandemic. Employees are seen as key actors in the learning network, and their perspectives are relevant for understanding challenges and outcomes in HRD more fully (Lilova & Poell, 2019). These should be included in further research.

We acknowledge the first author’s positionality and insider bias as a potential research limitation. A talent manager in a large corporate setting herself, she brought her own experiences to the table, which enabled access and created trust with interviewees on the one hand, but likely hindered her to maintain a critical distance throughout the interview and data analysis process (Anderson, 2017). While we believe that scholar-practitioners are well suited for this sort of research, we are aware of how our positionality or standpoints will have impacted the research process and outcomes.

The findings presented in this paper focused mainly on activities around L&D. A deeper look into our transcripts and an enhanced analysis on the topic of CD activities could be of interest. This would allow us to explore the observed role shift of CD into the hands of business managers more fully. We had sampled mostly traditional organizations in our current study; consequently, some of our findings might be tinted with a more traditional view on HRD activities and their partnering structures. In terms of future research, we believe that the study’s scope could be expanded to allow for more variation in the sample. This could be done by adding more U.S.-based organizations to the sample or by expanding the sample into other geographies, for instance, Europe or Asia. By adding organizations from other less traditional sectors, such as start-ups, Internet technology, or service companies, we would diversify the sample and most likely bring new actors, processes, and structures to light.
5.4 | Practical implications

Actors in the learning network take on key roles in organizing HRD activities. According to our findings, this statement is true for HRD professionals as well as business managers who engage in strategic partnering on new initiatives, co-designing content, co-delivering programs, and forming sustainability alliances for impact. In these partnering role structures, organizational processes need adaptation in acknowledgment of this more distributed approach. For example, if CD is an HRD activity that is driven mainly by business managers, then they need to be consulted when developing CD processes and systems in their organization.

Another practical implication concerns educational programs in HRD, whether in the form of certifications from a professional body or in the form of master or doctoral programs at a university. Considering that business managers show increased interest in organizing HRD activities, this could impact the way that institutions structure, market, and staff their educational program offerings. It has already been pointed out that “boundary issues” (Kuchinke, 2015, p. 265) exist between HRD programs and those offered by business schools or schools of industrial and labor relations. Given our findings, we believe that those boundaries will get even more blurred, which means that the landscape of educational program providers will likely adapt and shift.

ENDNOTES


DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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REFERENCES


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