

MAJOR CHALLENGES TO THE EFFECTIVE MANAGEMENT OF HUMAN RESOURCE TRAINING AND DEVELOPMENT ACTIVITIES

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Abstract

Human resource training and development (HR T&D) in manufacturing firms is a critical aspect of the development of a knowledge-workforce in Malaysia. The objective of this study is to examine challenges to the effective management of HR T&D activities in manufacturing firms in Malaysia. In order to achieve this objective, in-depth interviews were conducted with 58 HR managers managing employees' training and development, employing a purposive or judgmental sampling technique. The study revealed three major challenges to the effective management of HR T&D. These include a shortage of intellectual HRD professionals to manage HR T&D activities, coping with the demand for knowledge workers and fostering learning and development in the workplace. It is hoped that the findings of this study will provide HR professionals with a clear understanding and awareness of the various challenges in managing effective HR training and development. Hence, relevant and appropriate policies and procedures can be developed and implemented for an effective management of HR T&D.

Key Words: human resource training, major challenges

INTRODUCTION

In the midst of transforming itself into a knowledge-based economy (k-economy), Malaysia, being a developing country, believes that building a knowledge-based workforce is imperative, particularly in the manufacturing sector. This is because manufacturing accounts for one third of the GDP and more than 70 percent of the country's exports, and contributes significantly towards its economic growth. Out of the total population of 25.8 million, 12 million are in the labour force and 3.5 million are employed in the manufacturing sector (Malaysia, Ministry of Finance, 2008). As a result, training and development (T&D) of human resources in the manufacturing sector is vital in preparing a capable and skilled workforce with the expertise to meet current and future challenges by providing them with technological skills as well as critical thinking abilities.

In supporting human resources' T&D, the Government has introduced and implemented the Human Resource Development Act (1992), and a range of support mechanisms, incentives and initiatives to assist the manufacturing sector. This is because the Government believes that investment in human capital is the key to the success of the country's economic growth. However, despite the support, incentives and initiatives implemented for HR T&D, the fact remains that problems or challenges to the effective management of HR T&D can arise. Empirical evidence from other developed and developing countries has identified considerable challenges to the management of HR T&D (see for example, Al Bahar, et al. 1996; Ardichvili and Gasparishvili, 2001; Lloyd, 2002; Budhwar and Sparrow, 2002; Budhwar, Al-Yamadi & Debrah, 2002; Alzalabani, 2002; Bing, et al, 2003). However, there is limited empirical evidence of challenges in managing HR T&D in Malaysia. Therefore, the objective of this study is to examine challenges to the effective management of HR T&D activities, particularly in manufacturing firms. It is hoped that the findings of this study will give HR professionals a clear understanding of the various challenges to the effective management

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of HR T&D. Hence, relevant and appropriate policies and procedures can be developed and implemented for the effective management of human resources' T&D.

LITERATURE REVIEW

A range of challenges are faced by organisations and HRD professionals in managing and implementing effective HR T&D, particularly in the climate of globalisation, and the new technological revolution begins with the importance of human capital in HRD practice, their education and technical training, and also their communication and language skills. Human resources' learning and motivation are also described as important features of effective HRD practices. However, their deficiencies in supporting the effectiveness of HR T&D pose a challenge to the development, management and implementation of effective HR T&D in organisations. Furthermore, the workforce's changing demographics are also seen to have an impact on HRD practices, alongside the organisation's HR strategies and investments in HR T&D.

Human Capital in HRD Practice

The central factor in HRD is the human resources or the human capital in an organisation. They are viewed as the driving force for the success of organisations because of their skills, competencies, knowledge and experience (Becker, 1975; Schmidt & Lines, 2002; Harrison & Kessels, 2004). Moreover, it has been suggested that for organisations to compete successfully in a global economy, it is important to hire sufficiently educated and skilled employees and provide them with lifelong learning (Nadler & Wiggs, 1986; Chalofsky & Reinhart, 1988; Nadler & Nadler, 1989; O'Connell, 1999; Streumer et al, 1999; Low, 1998; Harrison, 2000; Sadler-Smith et al, 2000). However, these are some of the problems faced by employers and organisations and seen as a hindrance to the effective management, training and development of human resources in a global economy (Roberts & McDonald, 1995; Fernald et al, 1999; Shim, 2001; Lloyd, 2002; Budhwar et al, 2002; Bates et al, 2002). In the specific context of HRD professionals, the literature has indicated that there is a shortage of HRD professionals who are skilled and experienced systems thinkers (Bing et al, 2003), and who have the ability to manage the vast and specialised function of HRD across organisations (Eidgahy, 1995; Buyens et al, 2001; Garavan, et al, 2002). For instance, it was reported by Budhwar et al (2002) that the lack of HRD professionals in Oman is a major obstacle to the nation's HRD efforts. Kerr & McDougall (1999) argued that problems also arise due to a lack of experience and understanding of HR T&D on the part of managers. Indeed, some writers have claimed that HRD professionals do have an important role, as they possess expertise in learning and in developing others to become experts (Wright et al, 1999; Eichinger & Ulrich, 1998; Chermack et al, 2003).

Education and Technical Training

The fundamental issues regarding human resources' lack of capabilities and intellectual abilities are said to be grounded in their levels of education and technical training (Low, 1998). It has been reported that organisations are faced with a challenge in acquiring high calibre human resources with adequate levels of education (O'Connell, 1999; Streumer et al, 1999). For instance, Silver (1991) reported that studies have shown that employees in British firms are seen to have low levels of educational and training qualifications compared to their competitor nations. Following this lead, if Britain, a developed country, is seen to have this problem, it is likely to be even more evident in developing countries. On this note, the International Labour Organisation has reported that more than half of the workforce in manufacturing firms, particularly in the South East Asia Region, only possess educational qualifications at primary level or lower (ILO, 1997). The arguments arise that as well as possessing the required skills for the job and being knowledgeable and trainable, human resources should also be required to possess at least a college or university qualification (Low, 1998; Chermack et al, 2003). However, the generalisation of this standard of education to all levels of employees is unclear and requires further empirical evidence. Nevertheless, it is agreed that an undergraduate degree provides the essential 'intellectual human capital' on which to build future learning and also a knowledge-workforce (ILO, 1997; Harrison & Kessels, 2004).

At the other extreme, some theorists have posited that human resources' level of education is interrelated with communication and language (see for example, Desimone et al, 2002; Alzalabani, 2002; Chermack et al, 2003). Indeed, it is important for trainers to provide and communicate learning to trainees, who, on the other hand, must accept and acquire learning (Wright et al, 1999; Eichinger & Ulrich, 1998), as any problems in communication and language abilities may have a negative impact on learning, training and development (Gilley & Maycunich, 2000:167; Desimone, et al, 2002:647; Noe, 2008:17; Alzalabani, 2002). On this basis, the deterioration of English language skills in Malaysia has been criticised by several writers, such as McGurn (1996), Hiebert (1996a & b) and Yunggar, (2005). Building on this criticism, the lack of English speaking workers or those who lack proficiency in English is having an adverse effect on education, learning and HR T&D efforts, particularly in Malaysia and Indonesia (Debrah et al., 2000). Moreover, problems with communication and language have also been associated with cultural integration. In HRD, the recognition and integration of culture is an important strategy in the learning, training and development of human resources (Garavan, 1991; McCracken & Wallace, 1999). However, several studies have reported that a lack of understanding of and adaptation to different cultures and values has been impeding learning and training (Branine, 1996; Burba, Petrosko & Boyle, 2001; Chermack et al, 2003; Hansen, 2003).

Learning, Training and Motivation

Turning to the transfer of learning, the extent to which employees are able to apply the knowledge, skills and attitudes acquired during any HRD intervention into the job context is viewed as a key consideration in HRD practice (Wexley & Latham, 1991; Yadapadithaya & Stewart, 2003). Do education, communication skills, language and culture have any effect on employees' transfer of learning? Previous research on the transfer of learning has indeed shown that as well as physical and social factors, employees' psychological conditions and abilities can either encourage or discourage the acquisition and transfer of new skills and knowledge (see for example, Baldwin & Ford, 1988; Wexley & Latham, 1991; Tannenbaum & Yukl, 1992; Cheng & Ho, 2001; Kupritz, 2002; Reid & Barrington, 2003). Psychological factors, in this context, may include employees' education, communication and language abilities, change and its resistance, and any other abilities or tendencies relating to the individual state of mind. On the other hand, some theorists have argued that the extent to which training skills and learning are transferred to the job and the workplace is strongly motivated by the immediate superior's support in the transfer of the learning process (see, for example, Noe, 1986; Tracey et al, 1995; Elangovan & Karakowsky, 1999; Santos & Stuart, 2003). Indeed, it was suggested in the strategic framework of HRD practice that top management support and line managers' involvement is an important feature in the effective management and implementation of HR T&D efforts (Garavan, 1991). However, a lack of support, commitment, involvement and cooperation in the development of human resources has been criticised as affecting the efficiency of the HRD system (Harrison, 2000; Garavan et al, 1998) and also affecting the effective development of employees' learning and motivation (Watkins & Marsick, 1993; Gilley & Maycunich, 2000)

Workforce Demographics

Other major concerns regarding changing workforce demographics or deficiencies related to human capital in HRD are said to include the increase of the ageing workforce – the so-called 'baby boomers' (Bova & Kroth, 2001; Chermack et al, 2003) - and also the exponential entrance of 'elite expertise workers' who are also known as 'generation X' and the 'gold collar' workforce (O'Hara-Devereaux & Johansen, 1994; Wedell, 1999; O'Connell, 1999; Holland et al, 2002). In retrospect, even developed countries such as the USA are facing problems related to the very high rate of 'baby boomers' entering the workforce (Bova & Kroth, 2001; Desimone, et al, 2002), and developing countries, including the Asia Pacific Region, are no exception to this trend. It has been argued that the ageing population in these countries has great implications for the future of human resources in organisations (Low, 1998; Debrah, 1998; Chermack et al, 2003). On the contrary, 'elite expertise workers' are viewed as technically expert, skilled and competent workers who possess the bargaining power to take control of their own career development and advancement (Chermack et al, 2003; Swanson & Holton III, 2001). As a matter of fact, not all such employees can be categorised as 'elite

expertise workers'. It has been argued that these elite workers may only include HRD professionals, highly skilled technical IT employees and also engineers who have shifted their values, work ethics and lifestyle from the traditional life-long employment and job security to constant retraining and job-hopping. These workers are criticised for continuously being in search of new and challenging jobs and a competitive working environment (O'Hara-Devereaux & Johansen, 1994; Wedell, 1999; O'Connell, 1999; Bova & Kroth, 2001; Holland et al, 2002; Chermack et al, 2003). As a consequence of these problems, employers and organisations may be required to review their HR strategies, particularly the integration of their HRM and HRD efforts.

Organisations' HR Strategies

The effectiveness and success of HRD interventions is conceptualised from a formal, structured and strategically focused HRD orientation (Garavan, 1991; Garavan et al, 1995; McGoldrick & Stewart, 1996; McCracken & Wallace, 1999; Swanson & Holton III, 2001; Gilley et al, 2002). Moreover, a strategically focused HRD structure is argued to consist of the ability of organisations to formulate plans and policies for HRD and integrate them with plans and policies in HR, and also with overall business plans (Garavan, 1991; McCracken & Wallace, 1999). Unfortunately, these strategies are often reported as being imperceptible, because they are mostly short-term plans and are scarcely available in some organisations (Garavan et al, 1999; Osman-Gani & Tan, 2000; Heraty & Morley, 2000; Ardichvili & Gasparishvili, 2001; Elbadri, 2001; Budhwar et al; 2002) and may be completely absent in small firms (Kerr & McDougall, 1999; Hill & Stewart, 2000; Hill, 2004). Inevitably, this leads to a lack of planning for human resources and can affect the recruitment, selection, training and development of employees (Armstrong, 2000; Gardiner et al, 2001; Sadler-Smith, 2004).

Those with expertise have very high value in organisations and are highly sought after (O'Donnell, 1999; Streumer et al, 1999). Therefore, with this in mind, it is the role of HRD to develop and provide for these high-value experts by focusing on the recruitment, selection, training and development of human resources (Ardichvili & Gasparishvili, 2001; Gardiner et al, 2001). In addition, it has been argued that because of the ageing population in the workforce, new strategies are required to recruit and retain highly qualified workers and also to strengthen organisations' knowledge management capacity (Debrah, 1996 & 1998; Bova & Kroth, 2001; Chermack et al, 2003). Indeed, it has been shown in the literature that this area of HR is increasingly competitive (Cunningham & Debrah, 1995) and challenging for HRD professionals (Shim, 2001). There have been criticisms that organisations are either not focusing on any of these roles or are not striking a balance among roles. For example, a study by Ardichvili & Gasparishvili (2001) indicated that there is evidence of a stronger emphasis on selection and recruitment than on employees' T&D. On the other hand, it has been criticised that identifying and selecting the right people for recruitment and retaining those that have been trained are areas of concern for HRD practice (Bhatta, 2002; Benson & Zhu, 2002; Yadapadithaya & Stewart, 2003). Following this lead, smaller firms with few employees who are operating largely on equipment and new technologies may be strongly affected. This is because identifying and selecting the right employees to be recruited, trained and developed is very important, and is particularly critical in smaller firms (Gardiner et al, 2001), as it directly relates to performance (Jacobs & Washington, 2003). Hence, given these issues in HRD practice, employers may have to examine their hiring and promotional criteria to ensure that the right human resources are selected for the appropriate job (Hansen, 2003).

Labour Mobility

The high rate of labour mobility is argued to be a major disincentive to the broad provision of training (Lloyd, 2002; Harrison, 2000; Hill & Stewart, 2000 & Hill, 2004), and thus a barrier to employees' career development and enhancement (Budhwar et al, 2002). These problems have been blamed for employees leaving the company in search of new career prospects, and also for the notion of 'poaching' of employees (Spurling, 1993; Greenhalgh & Mavrotas, 1994 & 1996; Joyce, McNulty & Woods, 1995; Debrah et al, 2002; Lloyd, 2002; Kerr & McDougall, 1999; Beckmann, 2002; Moen & Rosen, 2004). Specifically to the context of South East Asian countries, particularly Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore, Debrah et al

(2002) claimed that some firms are not providing the training that their employees need, but instead poach employees from other firms, who have already been trained and developed by their prior employers. However, it may seem that poaching is benefiting employers in terms of financial investment in training, but the extent of employees' adaptability to the new working environment and their ability to transfer previous experience and learning to their new jobs are unclear. In this context, Lloyd (2002) argued that it might be more cost effective to provide more rather than less training for highly skilled employees. However, in the context of the 'elite expertise workers' phenomenon, a better proposition and an effective strategy are yet to be empirically examined.

METHODOLOGY

Research Methods

This study is a part of a larger piece of research on HRD practices in manufacturing firms in Malaysia, which employs a mixed-method concurrent research design, but the data for this particular part was gathered through in-depth interviews with HR managers managing employees' training and development. In selecting the interview sample, a purposive or judgmental sampling technique was applied to select an appropriate sample of individuals with experience and in-depth knowledge of the HR T&D function. Based on judgmental sampling with set criteria, a total of 58 HR specialists were selected for interviews.

The managers interviewed in this study were from 58 manufacturing firms located in all thirteen states in Malaysia. Prior to the interview, these HR professionals were sent letters inviting them to participate in the study. The letters explained the objective of the study, and a copy of the semi-structured questionnaire was also faxed to them. The HR managers were then followed up with telephone calls to establish their willingness to contribute to the study, and appointments were made to conduct the interviews.

Data from the interviews were analysed immediately after each interview to identify constant and regular themes. As Yin (1994) suggests, the inductive process was used to look for consistent themes that emerge from the data and the deductive process was used to supplement the inductive approach to ensure that the researcher did not misconstrue or misinterpret the data. This overall iterative approach was used successfully within an interpretive methodological paradigm to identify clusters, emergent themes or categories whilst maintaining the richness of the data (Huberman & Miles, 2002). Moreover, throughout the analytical process, this study adopted the practical guidelines of 'conversation' analysis (Silverman, 2002) to clarify and detect unanticipated themes. Therefore, special attention was paid to respondents' body language and facial expressions in the interviews.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Lack of Intellectual HRD Professionals

It is considered in the literature to be important for employers to hire educated, skilled and knowledgeable employees in their organisations, as they are the main human capital or assets of the company (Nadler & Wiggs, 1986; Nadler & Nadler, 1989; Harrison, 2000, Schmidt & Lines, 2002; Harrison & Kessels, 2004). Similarly, HRD practitioners are also deemed to be important human capital in organisations because of their knowledge, skills, experience and competence to manage a complex and broad function such as HRD. Unfortunately, the lack of intellectual HRD professionals, who are the main human capital in the HRD function, is regarded as impeding the effectiveness of the HRD function in manufacturing firms in Malaysia. As revealed in this study, a majority of the manufacturing firms sampled had HRD practitioners who lacked the knowledge and skills to carry out the appropriate HRD functions. For instance, the lack of knowledgeable HRD practitioners who are sufficiently competent to perform needs analysis, evaluation and follow-up assessment is suggested to impede the effective implementation of HR T&D initiatives, as reported by several of the managers interviewed:

"We do provide training to our workers but our main problem is having someone to do the TNA, evaluation, follow-ups on training, etc. These tasks are tedious, complicated and

require an expert....like a real HRD expert! I cannot do them. Not my specialised area”
(HR & Administration Manager; Concrete & Cement; LSI)

“Our company provides quite a lot of training to our workers. We get external trainers to train our workers, as we do not have the internal expertise to handle training. My duty is to plan for our yearly training programme, get external trainers and get our workers to attend the training” (Training Executive; Chemicals and Petroleum; SMI)

From the above analysis, it is apparent that the manufacturing firms in Malaysia lack the manpower and the expertise to perform the various HRD responsibilities. This view confirms the findings of Debrah et al, (2000), whose study of the manufacturing sector in South East Asia revealed that this manufacturing sector needs knowledgeable and competent HRD personnel such as professional internal trainers with the expertise to train and develop employees within organisations. This implies that employers may have to focus on the recruitment of expert HRD professionals to take on the role of developing human expertise in their organisations and managing the various specialised HRD function such as training and development, performance management, career development and the management of organisational development and change. However, in the current scenario in the manufacturing firms in this study, there is a shortage of intellectual HRD professionals. Moreover, the existing HR managers who are responsible for HRD are multifunctional in their roles. These practitioners also viewed employees’ training and development as a secondary role to managing human resources.

Coping with the Demand for Knowledge Workers

While the Government’s HRD policy has been campaigning for employers and organisations to equip employees with the skills and knowledge to become knowledge workers, the HRD practitioners in these manufacturing firms are faced with the challenge of coping with the demand for knowledgeable and competent employees. Three critical factors will be discussed to describe the challenge faced by HRD practitioners in coping with the demand for knowledge workers: 1) hiring and retaining technical expertise and a competent workforce; 2) the education level of the workforce; and 3) the increase in the ageing workforce.

The **first** critical factor relates to the hiring and retention of technical expertise and a competent workforce. Employers and HRD practitioners are faced with challenges in hiring technical expertise and competent, knowledgeable employees, despite the fact that various technical and vocational institutions have been established by the Government to support technical and vocational training. The hiring of skilled, trained and knowledgeable workers is increasingly difficult in the competitive manufacturing industry, but at the same time, developing and retaining these workers increases the challenges facing employers and HRD practitioners (Cunningham & Debrah, 1995; Chermack et al, 2003). For instance, several of the managers interviewed deliberated on the issues related to hiring, retraining and retaining technical expertise, and it was found that employees usually leave their firms after being provided with training.

“.....it is difficult to get employees to stay after getting expensive training.....these workers are good and skilled, but we cannot stop them from going because they are looking for better prospects” (HR & Administration Manager; Machinery & Transport Equipment; LSI)

“.....all our technical workers have been in the company for many years.....they have been promoted from the bottom.....but the problem is that other competitor firms always pinch them.....” (HR & Administration Manager; Concrete & Cement; LSI)

“.....job-hopping is a common scene...a trend!...I am not surprised..... the longest, one can stay in an organisation is 3 to 5 years.....that is considered very long....” (HR & Administration Manager; Chemicals & Petroleum; SMI)

“Our workers are always being pinched by other competitors and even by our neighbouring company. It is part of the challenge of being in HR; that is why we rarely give expensive training to our workers, except those whom we know are dedicated and loyal. For example, two years ago, we sent eight supervisors and team leaders to Japan for six months to learn the new technology involved in making concrete slabs - it was a big investment. When they came back, two of them were offered jobs by our main competitor and they took the opportunity to leave.....” (HR & Administration Manager; Concrete & Cement; SMI)

Therefore, following this lead, workers in the manufacturing industries in this study were seen as either being ‘poached’ by competitor firms for their expertise or as ‘expertise elite’ workers, ‘generation Xers’ in search of their own career advancement, prospects for which tended to be lacking in the manufacturing firms surveyed. This phenomenon exists because these trained employees or ‘expertise elite’ are highly sought after or ‘poached’ by competitor firms offering higher salaries and benefits (Debrah et al, 2002; Lloyd, 2002; Kerr & McDougall, 1999; Beckmann, 2002; Moen & Rosen, 2004). This upcoming trend in the workforce, i.e., ‘generation X’ and the so-called ‘gold collar workforce’, includes HRD professionals, highly skilled technical and IT employees and engineers who have shifted their values, work ethics and lifestyles from the traditional focus on life-long employment and job security to constant retraining and job-hopping in search of challenging jobs and new working environments (Bova & Kroth, 2001; Holland, Hecker & Steen, 2002; Chermack et al, 2003). Therefore, the above implies that employers and HRD practitioners may have to assess and examine their hiring and promotional criteria to ensure that their employees are competent according to their job specifications (Hansen, 2003). Moreover, aspects such as training, retraining and career progression may require some serious attention to enable skilled and competent workers to be trained, retrained and retained within the organisation. Indeed, attracting and retaining capable human resources has become the key challenge for most organisations, as the workforce has become more challenging in terms of their valuable expertise and the working environment has become more competitive (O’Connell, 1999; Wedell, 1999; Chermack et al, 2003).

Second, the pressure for knowledge workers is not only associated with individual skills and capabilities but also with the education levels of employees (Silver, 1991; O’Connell, 1999; Streumer et al, 1999). It has been indicated that existing members of the workforce in the manufacturing firms mostly have a minimum qualification of Form Five, and some have no qualifications beyond Primary Six or are illiterate, particularly in the case of shop floor employees (production operators). These shop floor employees or production operators are later promoted to supervisory positions. However, the low education level of these promoted supervisory staff is problematic, as discussed in the following quotes:

“Well...it is not only the language problem, but in actual fact the major concern with many manufacturing firms, which I can see around me, is the low education of the workforce, especially in production. Most of our workers have Primary Six or at the highest, Form Three, without basic technical or vocational training. However, we are starting to employ more diploma holders or at least Form Five school leavers with computer skills” (HR & Administration Manager; Concrete & Cement; LSI)

“The educational problem is a big problem...because many of our workers were recruited some time back...they did not require high educational levels..... So any uneducated fellow workers can come to work in our company.....” (HR Executive; Metal; SMI)

The supervisory staff who have been promoted from the shop floor are reported as pioneers and senior workers in the production line whose experiences make them eligible for promotion to the supervisory

level. However, as a result of these employees' low levels of education, problems arise with language, communication and attitudes towards learning. The use of the English language is identified as an immense barrier to training and learning. For instance, a manager in the chemical industry made the following statement:

"...we share a lot of information with them. The majority of the workers are Malay and one extra thing that HR has to do is to make sure that they understand what was going on.....a lot of translation has to be done, because almost everything is in English and somebody has to do the translation....this has become a routine to HR..." (HR & Administration Manager; Chemicals & Petroleum; SMI)

Indeed, problems with language and communication usually transpire during training, particularly in communicating with trainers and consultants, as well as in correspondence and communication with management employees. The manufacturing firms and/or the private sector accentuate the use of English for official communication and correspondence, but with the existing workforce having been predominantly educated in Malay, the use of English has become a major challenge. This is corroborated by Debrah et al (2000), who argue that with the strong emphasis on the Malay language, English language skills are deteriorating very rapidly (McGurn, 1996; Hiebert, 1996a & b; and Yunggar, 2005). As such, adequate workplace literacy skills are important prerequisites for employee participation in HR T&D activities (O'Connell, 1999; Streumer et al, 1999). Organisations with relatively large numbers of employees with low basic skills and education may find it difficult to acquire employees' full participation and involvement in training (Bates, 2001). Furthermore, it has been found that employees with higher levels of education are sought after in the workforce (ILO, 1997; Low, 1998; Chermack et al, 2003), particularly in the manufacturing industry, and current employers are hiring employees with at least a diploma and University education with compulsory computer literacy.

Thirdly, it was reported that a majority of senior members of the workforce are reported to represent the older members of the workforce, commonly called 'baby boomers' in the literature (see, for example, Bova and Kroth, 2001; Desimone et al, 2002; Chermack et al, 2003). For example, as elaborated by a manager from the cement industry:

"We promote them based on experience. We find that many workers cannot cope with operating the machinery.... Advanced technology had caught up with them and they fall behind....we have to train them, but some people are too old to be trained. We can't demote or sack them, so we have to give them a different type of work that does not change...." (HR & Administration Manager; Concrete & Cement; LSI)

Indeed, it was revealed that the senior workforce are unable to cope with the increase reliance on computers and rapid technological advancement, and thus developing them to become knowledge workers may pose a challenge or rather a waste of resources (Low, 1998; Chermack et al, 2003). Generally, the above findings suggest that HRD practitioners are confronted with the challenge of hiring, training, retraining, retaining and developing employees to become knowledge workers. Furthermore, problems with the ageing workforce and their positions within the company pose a major challenge in developing them to become knowledge workers, particularly with regard to their levels of education. Following this lead, the literature has confirmed that issues of changing demographics in the workforce, such as education levels, interrelated with communication, language and the ageing workforce, are working against employers and HRD practitioners in many organisations (see, for example, Alzalabani, 2002; Desimone et al., 2002; Chermack et al., 2003; and Low, 1998).

Fostering Learning and Development in the Workplace

It has been clearly stated that HR T&D activities are designed to change an individual's behaviour and attitudes towards their job and organisation (Yan & McLean, 1998), but HRD practitioners are confronted with problems relating to employees' behaviour and attitudes. **Firstly**, it was found that top management, senior managers' and line managers' uncooperative behaviour towards HRD had a significant effect on the

effectiveness of HRD. For instance, it was reported that getting line managers to release employees to attend training and support employees' transfer of training and learning is a problem in this manufacturing sector. This is seen in the following statements by the managers interviewed:

"The managers or supervisors always have production as the most important thing on their minds. They always make it difficult for us to run training programmes smoothly. For example, when we have certain training programme for the production workers, the first thing they moan about is that they don't have enough manpower on the production floor for anyone to go for training..." (Training Manager; Machinery & Transport Equipment; LSI)

"I remember I went to this ROI training in Singapore, and when I came back I was excited to implement what I had learned in this company, but my boss said it was a waste of time.....I felt very demoralised..." (Training Manager; Machinery & Transport Equipment; LSI)

The heavy workload on the production line is typically cited by line managers as the reason for their lack of cooperation and support of HR T&D activities. This analysis showed that managers viewed production output as more important than providing employees with the required training, hence their obstructive behaviour. Another dilemma is employees' inability to transfer learning from the training programmes attended and apply this learning to the workplace. This is due to supervisors' lack of support for the transfer of training. Earlier research on the transfer of learning has provided convincing evidence that the work environment - the physical, social, and psychological conditions that individual employees experience at work - can either encourage or discourage the acquisition and transfer of new skills and knowledge (see for example, Tannenbaum and Yukl, 1992; Reid and Barrington, 1994; Cheng & Ho, 2001; and Kupritz, 2002).

Secondly, employees' pessimistic attitudes can be detrimental and challenging because behavioural changes, performance improvement and organisational effectiveness may be affected (see, for example, Marsick & Watkins, 1994; Swanson & Holton III, 2001). HRD practitioners in the manufacturing firms in Malaysia were seen to be concerned with the employees' attitudes and mindset towards their jobs, learning, training and development, particularly in terms of fostering a learning climate. The interviewees quoted below had this to say:

"...employees' attitudes.....this is the most challenging aspect of employees' training and development.....Skills are easy to enhance, but not attitudes....service is not their top priority, they work as an employee....their mentality is as an employee.....they don't work to achieve profits and targets....." (HR Manager; Metal; SMI)

"Our main problem is workers' attitudes towards their jobs.....they are not committed to their jobs...they will take emergency leave for no reason at all....or they always come to work late, the most common reason being 'traffic jam'....don't tell me they get stuck in the traffic every day...." (HR & Administration Manager; Machinery & Transport Equipment; SMI)

"The worst is attendance, because in the manufacturing line, workers' attendance is very important..... Our line is running continuously on shifts: if, let's say, every shift we have ten workers to run the production, if two workers don't come in, that will effect the production and many other problems will arise...." (HR & Administration Manager; Concrete & Cement; LSI)

Furthermore, employees are also reported to lack commitment towards learning and training, particularly the commitment to participate in training activities. For example, as noted by several managers, achieving full attendance for in-house training programmes is almost impossible. The percentage of absenteeism is usually between 15 and 30 percent per session.

“..... getting workers to attend training is such a difficult task...and also to get their full attendance. Either they themselves are reluctant to attend training programmes or they are distracted by problems on the shop floor.” (Training Executive, Chemicals & Petroleum, SMI)

However, some managers indicated that these employees actually have embedded pessimistic attitudes towards training. It was suggested that some workers are ‘*contented employees*’ who are observed as being very comfortable within the organisation, such that new changes are not a threat. For example, one manager made the following statement:

“I think these negative attitudes of the workers are because they are comfortable with their current position and achievement and they feel that they are stable within the company. These workers are not willing to take up new challenges.” (HR Manager; Metal; SMI)

The above attitudinal problems may imply that employees are actually resisting change. Of course, the phenomenon of change is often resisted, as it requires taking in new learning and adopting new skills and competencies (Tichy, 1983; Watkins & Marsick, 1993). Hence, HRD practitioners, employers and trainers are faced with the challenge of changing employees’ attitudes, behaviour and mindset towards positive learning and development. Indeed, top managers’ allegiance and support for HR T&D can facilitate the monitoring of employees’ continuous learning and development (Kotter, 1996; Fernald et al, 1999; Harrison, 2000; Desimone et al, 2002), but only a very small proportion of the top managers are involved in and committed to HR T&D. In fact, employers and HRD practitioners in these manufacturing firms are observed to be confronted by the individual employee-negotiated character of learning other than the necessary resources required to support such learning. Indeed, these dimensions are said to be an important adaptation in fostering learning and development in the workplace (Guile & Young, 1999).

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

In general, the challenges faced by employers and organisations in the effective management of HR T&D varied from concerns about the lack of intellectual HR professionals to coping with the demand for knowledge-workers and fostering learning and development in the workplace. The core and focal challenge is the lack of intellectual HRD professionals in manufacturing firms, and this suggests that employers viewed HR T&D as a function secondary to HRM and perhaps considered it as being of lesser importance. This implication could lead to the ineffective implementation of HR T&D activities and increase ambiguity and failure in effectively managing HR T&D as a whole.

As well as the major challenge presented by the lack of HRD professionals, HRD practitioners are currently being confronted with the challenge of coping with the demand for knowledge-workers, with issues relating to the hiring, training and retention of a skilled and competent workforce. The ageing workforce and their positions within the company also pose a major challenge in terms of developing older workers to become knowledge workers, particularly with regard to their levels of education. However, the issue of “how HRD practitioners cope with an ageing workforce, to develop knowledgeable and skilled workers to attain knowledge-worker status” requires further research.

Furthermore, the lack of commitment towards training can be seen throughout organisations, from top management to shop-floor employees. The top management and managerial level employees are found to be uncooperative towards HR T&D, whilst lower level employees lack the commitment to participate in training and development activities. This suggests that employees may have embedded pessimistic attitudes towards training and be fundamentally resistant to change. Of course, the phenomenon of change is often resisted, as it requires individuals to take aboard new learning and adopt new skills and competencies. In point of fact, employers and HRD practitioners in these manufacturing firms are seen to be confronted with the individual employee-negotiated character of learning rather than the resources required to support such learning. Indeed, these dimensions in learning are said to be an important adaptation with respect to fostering learning and development in the workplace (Guile & Young, 1999). However, to successfully develop and

foster learning and development in the workplace, it is essential for individual employees to engage in self-directed and self-motivated learning. The strategy of moving forward and planning strategically in response to these challenges to HR T&D remains the responsibility and initiative of each individual organisation. The findings of this study imply that the process of developing knowledge workers towards achieving knowledge-economy status is likely to be very challenging and to take a long time to achieve unless employers can surmount these challenges by developing and implementing contemporarily appropriate policies and procedures for HR management and development.

The literature has identified many challenges to the effective management of HR T&D in the global context. However, the findings from this study mainly reflect the major challenges faced by HRD practitioners in managing effective HR T&D in manufacturing firms in Malaysia. Therefore, it is hoped that these findings will contribute to and expand the existing literature on HR T&D as well as contributing to practice.

LIMITATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

This study is part of a larger research project on HRD practice in manufacturing firms in Malaysia, employing in-depth interviews with 58 HR professionals in selected manufacturing firms. This posits several limitations, including the small sampling size for interviews, the qualitative research methods employed and research rigour. It is suggested that a detached stand-alone exploration employing questionnaire surveys complemented with in-depth interviews with a larger sampling size be conducted. This would permit the findings to be generalised beyond manufacturing firms in Malaysia. Finally, as the findings of this study are specific to manufacturing firms, an investigation of the challenges to the effective management of HR T&D in other sectors, such as services, banking and finance as well as the public sector, is recommended.

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