

Strategic Role of Human Resource Development as Boundary Spanner

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Abstract

Boundary spanners are increasingly getting important in developing and executing successful strategies in a global, complex and increasingly chaotic external environment. Despite widespread research utilizing a boundary spanning perspective in disciplines such as strategic management and organization theory, there has been lack of focus on the strategic role of human resource development in managing organizational boundaries. In context of the strategic role of HRD as a boundary spanner, this paper expands the theoretical understanding on boundary spanners dilemma with a profound objective to present some implications for human resource practitioners.

Keywords: Boundary Spanning, Human Resource Development, Learning Organization

1. Introduction

Environments featuring high uncertainty and rapid change present different constraints and opportunities to organizations than do stagnant and stable environments (Miles, 1980). To exploit this new world of global opportunities, one of the major challenges is designing collaborations that can span considerable geographic distances and cultural boundaries (Lawrence and Lorsch, 1967). In today's dynamic business environment, a business has to go beyond its pre-specified boundaries to get what it needs regardless of where it exists – geographically, organizationally and functionally. Consequently, establishing the boundaries of an organization has become a difficult task (Marianne, 2006).

The key issue posed by the contingency perspective concerns how organizations can effectively match their structures and processes with their confronting environment (Lawrence and Lorsch, 1967). Different subunits within a given organization may confront different external demands. Though traditional human resource management (HRM) functioned under narrow operational boundaries, but in today's highly dynamic knowledge-driven economy, the role of human resource management needs to expand both within and outside the organization (Marianne, 2006). In this paper, it is our baseline proposition that human resource development (HRD) can profoundly facilitate the interaction between organizations and their external environments.

The efficacy of HRD organization to support a business in general and/or specific strategic business objectives can be maximized by developing (in the employees) required skills, competencies and practices to efficiently and effectively address the problems posed by a multitude of internal and external pressures. HRD can ensue to gain corporate competitive advantage by developing a mix of aforementioned competencies e.g. knowledge, capability and attitudes through effective human capital formation. For this purpose, HRD needs to increase its strategic orientation and facilitate boundary spanning activities within and outside the organization. To achieve this end, HRD needs to identify, recruit, reward and retain team members who will fill these roles as ‘boundary spanners’ while representing their organizations in these initiatives, identifying opportunities and threats, managing relationships, and embedding insights and learning back into the organization (Ansett, 2005). In this context, it is increasingly becoming important to understand the concepts of organizational boundaries, interface with special context to boundary spanning activities, and the role of HRD in creating, changing and developing effective organizational boundaries and interfaces (McCarthy *et al.*, 2003).

In this paper, after an exhaustive review of relevant literature, we have debated upon organizational boundaries, interface, boundary spanning, boundary spanners role and selection, and the strategic role of HRD in managing the organizational boundaries and boundary spanning activities. In the end, some implications for HRD practitioners have been presented.

2. Organizational Boundaries, and the Interface

Hoe (2006) reveals that organizational boundaries control the flow of knowledge in an organization from its outside environment as well as between the functional departments. He refers Brailsford (2001) to point out that these boundaries slow down the flow of knowledge and sharing of ideas. But, whenever problems expand beyond the boundary of an organization or department, actions across the organizational boundaries are taken to find a solution (Brailsford, 2001). Hoe (2006) terms these actions as boundary spanning roles that take place at the limits of organizations. This means that reciprocal exchange of knowledge takes place between the organizations and thus facilitates each organization to know the outside world better (Dollinger, 1984). Keeping in view this perspective, we define a ‘boundary’ as an entity which separates organizational activities, process or activity, and an “interface” as a point at which output leaves a boundary (Melan, 1989).

3. The Concept of Boundary Spanning

Considering boundary spanner as information gatekeeper, external representative of the firm, conduits for resource acquisition, and the influence agents, Au and Fukuda (2002) define boundary spanners as people within the organization who bridge external needs and provide information to the internal users. They represent their own organizations to different stakeholders. Their key role is to work with external customers, suppliers and other employees to resolve critical problems (Au and Fukuda, 2002). Within this context, boundary spanning activity is termed as the volume of cross boundary information that managers exchange. By collecting and sharing required knowledge on market conditions and practices, boundary spanners can facilitate formulating and implementing successful business strategies. We may say that boundary spanners can influence the way employees perceive the external environment. This is because boundary spanners determine the extent of the knowledge that enters the organization and who should receive this knowledge.

Boundary spanning requires strong external and internal links because it involves obtaining knowledge from outside the organization and distributing knowledge to internal users. Boundary spanners bring knowledge into the organization with the help of their informal and individual contacts (McDonald, 1995). Boundary spanners must be able to acquire market knowledge from key customers, competitors and other sources, and disseminate knowledge to the internal colleagues. Their ability to distribute knowledge across organizational boundaries is one of the core strategic building blocks of a learning organization (Hoe, 2006). Communication across recognized boundaries imports ideas and

information with the potential to modify the shared intellectual base (Weedman, 1992). Thus, in addition to obtaining market knowledge, boundary spanners must also be able to effectively disseminate this knowledge across internal boundaries (Tushman and Scanlan, 1981).

Boundary spanners work in areas where external and internal organizational boundaries cross and overlap. They occupy unique positions in organizations because of their work-related competence, and control over the acquisition and distribution of knowledge. More than their position in the organizational hierarchy, their uniqueness is a consequence of their individual motivation. These boundary spanners may be supervisors, managers, and/or certain other employees of the organization(s).

4. Role and Selection of Boundary Spanners

Since boundary spanning roles are generally more loosely defined and are continuously changing, issues of role ambiguity and role conflict are quite likely to arise. Ansett (2005) identifies key boundary spanning activities as; creating internal and external networks, issue identification, translating the knowledge back into the organizational culture, influencing and educating internal and external stakeholders, identifying internal champions, and creating buy-in and support for the organization. For effective fulfillment of their roles, boundary spanners need to balance internal staff and external customer demands (Hoe, 2006). They need to exhibit personal qualities such as being sociable, friendly, flexible, adaptable and spontaneous, enjoying new experiences and be able to express their thoughts freely and effectively. Employees in the areas of sales, customer service and project management are ideal candidates for boundary spanning activities.

5. Contribution of HRD in Managing Boundaries

McCarthy and colleagues (2003) by referring De Wit and Meyer (1999), describe two types of organization as: 1) discrete organization, and 2) embedded organization. In the discrete organizations, self interest drives individuals and organizations. Consequently, not a great deal of collaboration is witnessed, rather it is considered a weak strategy and organizational boundaries are clearly defined. Any collaboration movement is considered a zero-sum game. On the other hand, embedded organizations feature a dynamic mix of competitive and cooperative behaviors, high embeddedness in certain (internal and external) webs of relationships, and a joint pursuit for a win-win situation. HRD by facilitating interface can play a strategic role in embedded organizations because effective management of boundaries and networks can effectively address a number of critical issues and challenges such as trust, competencies and communication (Buttery and Buttery, 1995; Fulop and Kelly, 1997). Fenwick and Cieri (2004) regard "trust" as a significant construct for interpersonal relationships and performance in strategic alliances (Das and Teng, 1998) and inter-organizational networks (Bouty, 2000). Fenwick and Cieri (2004) reveal that the role of global human resource development and career development in global networks' performance is mediated through the development of necessary individual competencies such as the ability to develop and sustain network centrality and trust, and by providing positive career outcomes to motivate individual network participants for superior performance. Finally, the flow, magnitude and frequency of communication also significantly impact relationships among network partners (MacCarthy *et al.*, 2003)

6. Role of HRD in Embedded Organizations

In McCarthy and colleagues' (2003) opinion, HRD role in managing boundaries and interfaces in embedded organizations can be described at four-levels of analysis. At level 1, development of organizational leadership lays down a strong base for the development of flexible structures that enable boundaries and interfaces to operate effectively. Leaders in network organizations require being effective in communicating vision and articulating values. Leaders need to develop skills to facilitate

the development of structures and to effectively resolve uncertainty and ambiguity. HRD can significantly contribute in the development of leadership skills and competencies through administering state-of-the-art leadership development programs. However, as McCall (1988) asserts, many of the skills necessary for effective leadership are learned from experience- assignment to special projects and positions presenting opportunities to develop and refine leadership skills. Mumford *et al.* (2000) posit that learning from experience is based on the magnitude of challenge, variety of assignments and quality of feedback.

At level 2, HRD structure, policy and strategy can play an important role in the management of boundaries and interface as they possess the potential to communicate to stakeholders the commitment of HRD to be flexible, adaptive and innovative in response to its content. To be innovative in its content, the dimensions of HRD strategy, policy and structure should be responsive to the changing environment and demonstrate the capacity of HRD to be relevant in an organization that is witnessing permanent change and requires human resources to combine in order to think in novel and innovative ways. To achieve this end, specific policy and structure initiatives include: taking measures to decentralize HRD activities (McGoldrick *et al.*, 2001), increasing responsibility of the employees for learning and development (Sambrook and Stewart, 1998), developing skills in the managers to be effective learners (Garawan *et al.*, 1999), promoting continuous and professional development policies (Dixon, 1999), and providing support mechanisms to facilitate mutual learning and sharing of knowledge and ideas (Nonaka and Tekeuchi, 1995).

At level 3, HRD can effectively intervene to synthesize the organizational boundaries and interfaces. The possible measures in this regard include: enhancing the capacity to ask questions, identification of learning through reflection, ensuring opportunities to learn critically, provision of time and space to deal with problems and reflect on them, moving away from hierarchical learning groups, empowering learners to drive the learning process, working co-operatively on real life issues and learning through actions rather than simply talking about it.

At level 4, HRD as boundary spanner to external context can play a competitive role in forming mix of competencies required in dealing with complex set of external and internal networks by developing human capital that is unique and difficult to replicate by other organizations. This unique human capital can be developed through changing the organization's culture to meet demands posed by the external context, developing teamwork or coping with the need to downsize the organization (Durand 1996; Prehalad and Hamel, 1990).

Finally, to recognize the learning organization as major initiative designed to manage the interface with external environment, MacCarthy and colleagues (2003) by quoting Rifkin and Fulop (1997) have suggested the following means to effectively administer the transition to learning organization: 1) create a learning environment through an emphasis on meaning and understanding, 2) promote such learning activities which give emphasis to organizational learning, 3) focus on attributes which promote learning and knowledge sharing, 4) follow a prescriptive model incorporating attributes that facilitate learning in organization, 5) give importance to the idea of learning space which places an emphasis on micro practices such as understanding relationships, generating ability to think, frame, question, and act upon ideas. Moreover, effective organizational learning comes from the organization's ability to properly integrate employee learning into the appropriate organizational systems, structures, routines and culture.

7. HRD, Career Development and Boundary Spanning

McDonald and Hite (2005) proclaim that HRD can make a significant difference in individual careers by subjecting them to important organizational support mechanisms, learning activities and evaluation processes. Organization support mechanisms include fairness and equity, environmental issues, and life-work balance issues. Fairness and equity is ensured by promoting workplace justice and career-development opportunities for employees at all levels (Conlon, 2004). Environment issues mainly revolve around reward structures, organizational climate, leadership, and job design (London, 1983).

Life-work balance issues such as work-family conflicts play an important role in career choices, aspirations, and patterns especially in areas relating to women careers (Eccles, 1994).

Traditionally, HRD has contributed to career development through formalized programs such as training, mentoring, tuition reimbursement, job posting and career-planning workshops. These learning activities have been designated as “bounded” activities because availability and access to these events is dependent on an organization’s willingness and ability to offer them. As such these are not in everyone’s access. Therefore, the organizations can focus upon alternative “boundary-spanning” activities such as informal learning, networking, community-based or other forms of mentoring as career development devices.

7.1. Informal Learning

Powel and colleagues (2001) reveal that the organizational dependence on formal learning is decreasing and getting substituted with informal learning in the face of reorganization, downsizing and the constant evolution of job descriptions and roles. It is due to this reason that natural resources (learning opportunities) within the organization offer quick, cost effective career-development activities that reinforce the business strategy and promote learning through day-to-day work. Informal learning can play an important role in re-designing career development. HRD can contribute here by facilitating the “learning how” level of the experience- which involves reflection and critical thinking about the learning, as well as the “learning why” level which involves integrating “the original learning experience into both professional and the personal aspects of their lives” (Powell *et al.*, 2001). The learner who gets to the “learning why” level will have greater self-efficacy, hence improved performance, and will consequently set more challenging career goals (Powell *et al.*, 2001).

7.2. Networking

Another possible boundary-spanning activity as per McDonald and Hite (2005) is facilitating the employees to develop formal and/or informal networks both within and outside their work environments. Individuals can develop and take advantage of networking opportunities within the organization, the profession and the community at large (Forret and Sullivan, 2002). These networks can serve multiple purposes such as providing socio emotional support as employees attempt to balance life-work issues, and facilitating knowledge acquisition (Martins *et al.*, 2002). Benefits of these networks include a strong “knowledge base within the company” and an increase in “cross-fertilization of ideas and information across business units and departments” (EBay *et al.*, 2003). “Organization-wide networking groups” not only provide social support for individuals in the minority gender in their work groups, but also encourage them to develop stronger ties with their communities (Martins *et al.*, 2003). HRD can play an important role in: 1) promoting the benefits of networks to upper management, 2) offering expertise and/or assistance in facilitating such groups, 3) providing information on how to set them up and, 4) monitoring their effectiveness.

7.3. Mentoring

Martins and colleagues (2002) and McDonald and colleagues (2002) have argued that employees often feel the need to develop their careers globally beyond ‘walls’ of the corporations in which they are working. Acting on community boards, volunteering in nonprofit organizations, and helping in community events can cement the skills-base as well as provide additional networking opportunities and socio emotional support to them. Organizations benefit from the knowledge, skills and confidence that employees gain from participating in these activities. HRD can take the lead role in encouraging volunteerism, acting as a resource for employees desiring an involvement in their communities, and advocating for flexible work schedules so that employees can engage in such activities.

MacDonald and Hite (2005) discuss the efficacy of alternative forms of mentoring as boundary spanning activities. According to them, the benefits of having mentors include increased career

satisfaction, success and psychosocial support. But since only limited number of people can avail this benefit, therefore, as an alternative, peer relationships are more readily available and they last longer than traditional mentoring relationships (Kram, 1995). Other forms of mentoring include networks (De Janasz *et al.*, 2003), group or team mentoring (Dansky, 1996), and virtual or e-mentoring (Bierema and Merriam, 2002). The benefits of employing these methods include reducing the number of mentors needed and creating more opportunities to access more diverse mentors (Hamilton and Scandura, 2002), providing more flexible developmental opportunities for individuals telecommuting (Dansky, 1996), working in remote sites or with work-life balance conflicts, and making mentoring more accessible and unrestricted (Muller, 2004). Organizational planning to offer these developmental activities need HRD's involvement in connecting individuals and/or groups, and providing training and coaching to mentors and participants. If resources are limited to fully implement these mentoring activities then HRD managers should be able to suggest alternative ways employees might become involved in mentoring outside of the work setting.

Finally, organizations need to carry out a continuous assessment of the effectiveness of employees' career development efforts at individual as well as organizational levels. At individual level, salient criterion for gauging success of such efforts may include a positive change in salary, promotion, attitudes about one's career, adaptability, identity etc. The impact at organization levels can be assessed by taking into account factors such as; 1) impact on organizational systems and processes in terms of efficiency and effectiveness, 2) increase in return on investment (ROI), and 3) increase in intellectual capital of the organization.

8. Final Words

Even though most of the HRD practitioners and scholars would argue that HRD is crucial in shaping the strategic direction of an organization (McDonald and Hite, 2005), fewer would agree that HRD is even present at the strategic planning table. We suggest that the role of HRD needs to be repositioned in the face of rising dynamism and challenges in the global marketplace. HRD's involvement has to be considered critical in determining a company's role and responsibility regarding employees' careers. Therefore, career development must not be considered merely a stand-alone program, but rather as a process that is integrated into the whole system such that it influences strategic direction of the organization. HRD needs to be made responsible for the learning and performance that is strategic and operational (Yorks, 2005) and that cross the multiple levels of organizations including individual, team/group/process, and organization-wide (Gubbins and Walker, 2007). HRD practitioners need to identify and develop connections between individuals, teams, and functions with mutually valuable social resources and ensure that the organization obtains greater returns for its human resources (Walker and Gubbins, 2007). HRD professionals can help younger employees in learning: 1) how to best cultivate these interactions in the boundary-spanning networks, 2) how to maximize their potential as learning experiences because boundary-spanning networks provide the opportunity to learn from varied viewpoints, and 3) how to build a wide range of contacts (McDonald and Hite, 2008). Lastly, HRD should involve key stakeholders in setting its objectives, identifying opportunities for learning, and in effectively managing knowledge especially of the tacit-type.

9. Summery

Highly complex and diverse global environments of organizations have increased importance of the organizational forms that go beyond the traditionally-recognized borders of organizations. Boundary spanners are increasingly getting important in developing successful strategies in a global, complex and increasingly chaotic external environment. This poses a significant challenge for those corporate professionals who are often unable to comprehensively and objectively deal with both the internal and external context of their volatile environments. The HRD function can contribute in various ways in creating and shaping organizational boundaries. Firstly, by developing the leadership so that they not

only drive the creation of boundaries and interfaces but they also successfully manage them to achieve organizational objectives. Second, by the development of HRD structures, policies, and strategies to enable HRD to be positioned at key decision points, align it with current contingencies facing the organization and demonstrate flexibility and responsiveness. Third, by introducing innovative HRD interventions that focus on collaboration, networking and problem solving while operating at a team or organization level instead of the traditional individual level. Fourth, HRD can contribute to the effective management of dynamic contexts by focusing on “boundary-spanning” activities such as informal learning, networking, community-based and/or other alternative forms of mentoring. To recognize the human resource development (HRD) as a part of the strategic human resource management (SHRM) approach in a global form of organization, HRD must strive to establish linkages between its structure, policies, and strategies- and the strategic and environmental contingencies of the organization. To earn the strategic respect, HRD has to provide the learning solutions that focus on collective learning, collaboration and which contribute to the creation of a climate of learning within the workplace.

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