

In a time of COVID-19 pandemic, stay healthy, connected, productive, and learning: words from the editorial team of HRDI

As we are preparing this scheduled issue of Human Resource Development International (HRDI) in the Spring 2020 during the COVID-19 Pandemic, we feel that it is our responsibility to start a dialogue with our readers, authors, and peers. In an effort to guide this discourse, we want to use this editorial to highlight a few challenges that present close relevancy to the field of human resource development (HRD); then, to discuss what might be the roles of HRDI scholarly community in learning, building resilience, and leading in this time of crisis.

The pandemic of COVID-19 has drastically changed the way we work, communicate, and socialize and left us with the challenge of making significant changes in a matter of days on an extraordinary scale. Social distancing guidelines put forth by our respective governments and public health officials have resulted schools and business closures that have left many of us flustered and had to cope with the level of changes that are unprecedented. Online learning and working from home are ways to mediate a modicum of normalcy for many but others might not be as 'lucky'. For some industries such as manufacturing and hospitality, the work could not be conducted online or from home, unless your business is considered 'essential', some workers have lost their jobs because of the pandemic. In the U.S. alone, a total of 3.28 million people filed for unemployment insurance in the week ended 21 March 2020, according to the Bloomberg News (Pickert 2020). The impact of COVID-19 Pandemic is extensive and has presented enormous challenges to individual workers, organizations, communities, nations, and the world as a whole.

The first challenge came with the sudden change in our place of work. The possibility of working from home (WFH) under the flexible work policy has been typically used by companies to attract talents. Researches have reported many psychological benefits of such a policy. However, when WFH is not by choice and for people with very limited experience of WFH, this change presents a significant challenge. As a colleague has keenly observed the demands that might occur with WFH if you have children at home

because of school closures: 'regular change of diapers, preparing lunches, home- schooling, regulating screen times, and planning and scheduling for recess'. We have to adapt and manage the changes brought by this new place of work and all the roles and responsibilities, pros and cons that come with it. Is your home's internet connection ready for multiple users to have virtual meetings, taking virtual classes at the same time? Does each of you have a quiet place to work and attend online learning?

The second challenge is the potential feeling of isolation and disconnectedness. The policy of social distancing is important to stop the spread of the virus; however, it is important to recognize that social distancing is about physical distancing. It is actually not about stopping all social activities. Staying socially connected is very important for humanity's survival and mental health. The resiliency of the human species always finds ways to adapt and maintain social connection, especially with the help of information and communication technology. During the lockdown in Wuhan, the epicenter of the COVID-19 outbreak, people created many ways to stay connected, such as 'cloud clubbing', 'home karaoke station', and online workout groups (Wright 2020). For many, especially the non- digital natives, we have to learn quickly how to stay connected with a set of digital collaboration and social networking tools. While keeping ourselves physically healthy, we need to figure out a new normal to keep ourselves, our colleagues, and our loved ones psychologically healthy as well. This realization might give virtual teams a new meaning and purpose, in addition to being a productive means for you or your organizations.

The third challenge is that this Pandemic will likely increase the speed of the change and reshape the future of work. Even before the COVID-19, the surge of automation, the rise of artificial intelligence (AI), and machine learning have amplified the speed of change, from the way we do our work, the tools we use, the aesthetics of work, the issues associated with work, and the meaning of work (Centre for the Future of Work, 2020). It is uncertain in what way we would be able to keep our jobs or be replaced by the machines, and in what way our work will be changed by this Pandemic. If history gave us any indication, 9/11 changed the jobs of airport security for the entire world. When the Pandemic is finally over, people may or may not be able to go back to their 'normal' works or workplaces because the Pandemic will

change our jobs and organizations forever, in ways we have yet to understand. We are only at the beginning of this change process. We, HRD professionals, should think and offer ideas, recommendations, training, and learning programmes to help prepare WFH and displaced workers to develop their employment skills so they can be better prepared to face these unknown challenges (Li and Zehr 2020).

Last but not least, a new wave of changes is coming to business organizations. Business leaders have to think about not only how to cope with the current changes but also what to do to prepare for future scenarios. For the past decades, business strategies influenced by globalization, lean production, just-in-time supply chain management have many organizations relying on a system of interdependency. The system of interdependency emphasizes efficiency and minimizes cost over self-sufficiency that has driven organizations to outsource by using a globalized supply chain with minimal inventory. In this system, if any of the components of the supply chain sinks, the entire system collapses because no one can make a final product with 99% of the parts. COVID-19 has closed production of the world in waves, the impact to this system of global interdependency will have long and lasting effects, and many are yet to be realized. Will COVID-19 force business leaders to rethink their unit of analysis for business strategy development and reconsider self-reliance or self-sufficiency? These are just a few of the questions that will ponder business leaders for the years to come. Obviously, there are many other challenges facing workers and business organizations during this time of crisis. The length of this editorial allows us to address just a few to initiate this discussion. It is our hope that more will join to help shape the future of HRD in times of crisis.

Working from home (WFH): a source of real learning

Working from home, simply a government requirement in response to the spread of the virus, has shifted the debate on organizational life with the use of different terminologies (for most people) including virtual meetings, virtual desks, online software, e-learning, and millions of videos on how to work from home. For some, like the newbies (individuals with limited WFH experience), this is probably the most intense period of their professional life as the pace of change is unprecedented. For some others, like the veterans (individuals with significant experience of remote working), life is

normal as changes in working patterns have not massively affected their working practices. What is certain, the three letters WFH (working from home) have never been so relevant for millions of people. Suddenly, changes across the globe meant that people have been asked to engage with e-learning and online activities in order to be able to achieve work-based tasks while at home. This new reality puts the newbies in the spotlight. We know for sure that most of them did not have a positive view of virtual work prior to the coronavirus. Physical, face-to-face, traditional work has been the epitome of their working life. For some people, going to the office is a way of living, for others, it offers a scope in life. Nevertheless, we do not live in normal circumstances. WFH is now the norm and suddenly the newbies (with or without their choice) have been transformed into an inevitable force for organizational change. They are currently the leading force on organizational response to WFH reiterating the argument that it is now the right time to introduce more strategic remote work policies (Choudhury, Larson, and Foroughi 2019).

For some time, literature has been highlighting that virtual work is an inevitable process due to changes in the world of work with many professionals having to make adaptations in order to transform their home to a working space (Sungdoo and Hollensbe, 2017). According to International Data Corporation (Bassett, 2018), the mobile worker population in the United States will grow at a steady rate over the next 5 years, increasing from 96.2 million in 2015 to 105.4 million in 2020. Well, it is now the reality. Millions of newbies are asked to navigate themselves into new remote work policies, software, and activities as well as to find the right balance between work and personal life. In such rapidly changing circumstances, this level of organizational preparation may have not been feasible highlighting a number of pitfalls with existing WFH policies. The reality is that most newbies have been forced to learn fast how to stay at the top of the game and ensure that they have the knowledge to follow the veterans. They have to engage with online forums, amend work documents, undertake online meetings, share resources, and make the argument online. They simply try to figure out what they have to do and, in many cases, without any support. On the funny side, nobody can complain about the ability to have home-cooked lunches and avoid commuting.

Suddenly, HRD, e-learning, distance learning, self-learning, and online learning have turned out to be fashionable, relevant, and such important dimensions in all industries across the globe. Uncertainty about the duration of social distancing, self-isolation, and business operation restrictions demonstrates the need for organizations to support all employees, especially the newbies. From experience, we know there are many issues to consider. We know that there are concerns about how line managers approach remote performance, issues with communication, lack of collaboration and socialization, and concerns about sustained effort (Chen and Wu 2015). However, the scope now is not simply to get involved in an academic debate about the scope of WFH in such unprecedented times. The scope should be simply to emphasize the need for HRD practitioners and organizations to understand further the needs of newbies and offer appropriate learning support when needed. Apart from the psychological effects of remote work, we should also not underestimate the enormous amount of learning those individuals have undergone within just a few days. Intense learning, meaningful learning, and probably learning with impact at personal and professional level. But, can you assess the impact when there is no time to reflect? How you can fully utilize learning when working patterns are different and, in many cases, resources limited? How can you use key skills that are developed when the future looks so uncertain? Am I supposed to carry on working from work after the end of the pandemic? All these questions demonstrate the scale of change at the individual and organizational level.

It is also very tempting to suggest new ways of research or highlight gaps in the literature. This might not be as relevant as it was before the global economic shutdown. However, we need to create the space and recognize the newbies' extraordinary transformation into remote workers. We need to commemorate their astonishing ability to adapt to a new situation regardless of age, race, gender, and level of expertise. The HRD community should not miss the opportunity to have a meaningful contribution on how to design future organizational learning practices with impact. Conventional HRD practices would not be sufficient to address future needs on remote work. This is because the world of work will certainly be different after the pandemic. There is an excellent opportunity to make 'real' change on how we design work and offer learning opportunities to professionals. Organizations will be forced to assess how newbies can sustain commitment and engage

effectively online (Capece and Campisi, 2015) as well as to examine whether their organizational response (in most cases, a forced change towards WFH) to remote work has proven beneficial. What happened to the argument that employees, who work remotely, are actually not working (Bloom 2014) therefore compromising quality? The traditional managerial mindset which fears the loss of control and productivity could not be more challenged with the recent developments. When life goes back to normal, organizations across the globe should have open and honest conversations as to whether learning by force has had any direct impact on performance and productivity. Of course, there are differences between generational age groups in their perceived interpretation of WFH and online resources. Until the dust settles, we do not really know the real impact of those changes. What we really know is that organizational policies on flexibility, learning, professional development, working conditions, training, and development will be reviewed to address the new realities. Let us hope the newbies will be given the space and the resources to move to the other side, the veterans.

Building resilience through virtual connection

Resilience is defined as the 'capacity to rebound or bounce back from adversity, conflict, and failure' (Luthans 2002, 702). As we cope worldwide with the COVID-19 health crisis, the concept of resilience is highly relevant to our lives. Interestingly, the literature indicates that extreme events such as natural disasters have been referred while conceptualizing organizational resilience 'that can contain, repair and transcend vulnerability in organizational systems' (Waldman, Carmeli, and Halevi 2011, 941). Whereas individual resilience is mostly situated in the context of everyday workplace stressors (e.g. incivility, micro-aggressions, discrimination, etc.) and career disruptions (e.g. job loss, role changes, etc.) where one's resilience arises from 'self-esteem, self-efficiency, subjective well-being, self-determination, locus of control and support systems' (Bimrose and Hearne 2012, 339). However, in the current COVID-19 outbreak circumstances that are akin to a natural disaster, both concepts of individual and organizational resilience seem germane in terms of how we engage in sensemaking about this crisis. It is important to note that how we as individuals engage in sensemaking about the current crisis and hence, grow resilient towards the crisis will be influenced inevitably by our occupational and institutional contexts (Maitlis and

Sonenshein 2010). Nevertheless, Kossek and Perrigino indicate that 'although an individual's resilience is influenced by the higher level social environments in which s/he is embedded, the social context, particularly occupational influences have been under-examined in the management literature' (2016, 731).

One of the salient occupational influences on efforts to cope with the current health crisis is the impact of different industry regimes and professional norms on the transition to the online environment and remote working conditions. As organizations in different industries navigate the uncharted territories of working remotely, it is critical for HRD professionals to consider how different organizational cultures can enable employees to utilize virtual relationships with their colleagues to build individual and organizational resilience? What kinds of communication expectations can guide employees to build and sustain high-quality co-worker relationships virtually to cultivate resilience as a community and how can professional norms be adjusted to accommodate such communication expectations? Given that supportive leadership and co-worker relationships have been reported to impact employee resilience positively (Cooke, Wang, and Bartram 2019), it is imperative to know how to develop such relationships in online environments as employees are trying to adjust to the demand of working remotely.

These questions necessitate some reflection on what we know about developing high quality relationships through virtual platforms. The primary challenge for high-quality relationships in virtual platforms is the lack of proximity. Conventional wisdom suggests that geographical or physical proximity would determine the extent to which one might feel close to another (Kiesler and Cummings 2002), and hence, long-distance work relationships are typically thought to be vulnerable to challenges and misunderstandings. However, this conventional thinking has been questioned as geographically distributed work arrangements have become more common with the advent of different types of videoconferencing tools (Chayko 2007). Some scholars have drawn our attention to the concept of 'perceived proximity' to understand the paradox of why and how high-quality relationships through virtual platforms can make one feel closer to someone even though they are geographically far away from each other (O'Leary, Wilson, and Metiu 2014; Wilson et al. 2008). The concept of perceived proximity (defined as cognitive and affective sense of relational closeness; Wilson et al. 2008) in contrast to actual proximity assessed in terms of objective or spatial distance raises the possibility that spatial distances might not be experienced equally

by all team members (Wilson et al. 2008). As perceptions of proximity might not increase linearly with actual proximity reflected in the spatial distance (Hansen and Løvås 2004; O’Leary and Cummings 2007), a subjective understanding of proximity may be more consequential when it comes to building high- quality work relationships in virtual environments.

Given that one’s perceptions of proximity with a colleague with whom they are connecting to work or collaborate remotely are more likely to impact the quality of co-worker relationship, how can HRD professionals guide and support employees to increase perceived proximity with their colleagues? Scholars studying the concept of perceived proximity emphasize two factors: (1) communication; and (2) identification.

Frequent, substantive (i.e. more personally significant), and interactive (i.e. more reciprocally communicative exchanges) communication can impact perceived proximity positively through increasing cognitive salience, reducing uncertainty, and helping one envision their colleague’s context (Burgoon et al. 2002; Hinds and Cramton 2014). In reference to the COVID-19 health crisis, frequent, substantive, and interactive communication can help employees know how their colleagues are coping with work–life balance when they have to attend to both work and child-care demands at home. Furthermore, such communication can help to share updated information about the latest changes in institutional policies and practices in reference to the health crisis and thereby, reduce ambiguity. For example, for one of the authors, their School of Education (SoE) Dean has instituted weekly virtual check-in meetings among faculty and staff to enable everyone to share how they are coping, ask questions about any policy changes related to schedule changes in online learning, and other relevant university matters. However, not all organizations or industries are familiar with such transparent and frequent communication practice due to traditional bureaucratic structures and norms, and hence, HRD professionals would need to advocate and get buy-in from senior leadership to institute such practices.

Identification is a process of self-categorization with respect to others that is enabled by awareness of some commonality (e.g. a sense of belongingness to a same social group; sharing a common interest, passion, or virtue towards a cause; awareness of common lived experiences, etc.) (Dutton, Dukerich, and Harquail 1994). Once employees consider distant colleagues as belonging to similar categories (e.g. mothers trying to work from home amidst the

COVID-19 health crisis; experts in education who want to volunteer to help school districts to deliver instruction online due to school closure for the outbreak, etc.), they tend to develop a set of common goals (e.g. meeting a deadline, changing a particular problem, etc.) and thus, a shared identity, that can increase their perceived proximity (Wilson et al. 2008). In the process of sharing commonalities, one should not shy away from expressing both positive and negative emotions they are experiencing in regards to the crisis (e.g. renewed sense of appreciation for close one's good health; frustration of being torn between family and work demands) in a constructive manner. Emotional carrying capacity (ECC) of a relationship (i.e. the extent to which both positive and negative emotions can be shared in a relationship) is likely to increase relationship quality and individual resilience (Stephens et al. 2013). Again, while there is no doubt that affect or emotions matter for shaping all critical organizational behaviours and outcomes (Barsade and Gibson 2007), not all organizations or industries are receptive to the idea of employees expressing emotions. Needless to say that HRD professionals should play an important role in challenging age-old organizational norms that stifle the authentic expression of emotions, especially amidst crisis situations as giving employee autonomy to engage with their emotions can enable sensemaking to understand novel situations such as the COVID-19 outbreak (Heaphy 2017).

In summary, HRD professionals can play a strategic role as change agents in supporting employees across different occupations and industries to engage in frequent, substantive, interactive, and authentic communication with colleagues, thus, enabling them to perceive high proximity with each other in virtual spaces and develop a shared identity as a means to build resilience (Mitsakis 2019; Wang, Hutchins, and Garavan 2009). HRD professionals can lead the discussion on how to prepare individuals, teams, and organizations of this new normal, how to prepare WFH and displaced workers to be ready for the future of work, and how to work with and manage the change of organizations. Again, this is just the beginning, we welcome ideas and discussions that help us cope, respond, and prepare for the future at this time of drastic changes.

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