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Julia Calver ^a, Gennia Cuthbert ^b, Sue Davison ^c, David Devins ^a,
Jeff Gold ^a, Iestyn Hughes ^d & Paul Tosey ^e

^a School of Events Management, Leeds Metropolitan University,
Leeds, UK

^b HR Directorate, Sunderland University, Sunderland, UK

^c ETC Training and Institute of Virtual Leadership, Leeds, UK

^d Royal Bank of Scotland, London, UK

^e Surrey Business School, Surrey, UK

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PERSPECTIVES

HRD in 2020: a hop-on, hop-off city tour

Julia Calver^a, Gennia Cuthbert^b, Sue Davison^c, David Devins^a, Jeff Gold^{a*},
Iestyn Hughes^d and Paul Tosey^e

^aSchool of Events Management, Leeds Metropolitan University, Leeds, UK; ^bHR Directorate, Sunderland University, Sunderland, UK; ^cETC Training and Institute of Virtual Leadership, Leeds, UK; ^dRoyal Bank of Scotland, London, UK; ^eSurrey Business School, Surrey, UK

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This article reports on the outcome of a Future Search Conference in the UK to consider human resource development (HRD) in 2020 and beyond. We firstly consider themes from the past into the present. This includes the persistence of solutions in HRD that are systematic, predictable, how apprenticeships in the UK have had to accommodate government policies to ameliorate youth unemployment and the long-standing difficulty for HRD of failing to demonstrate a return on investment (ROI) on activities. We then present four scenarios based on key questions for the future relating to value of HRD and whether this will be a future for HRD. Responses to the questions form scenario logics which we present against the theme of city tour. Each scenario is explained against the presented logic with positive, negative, ambiguous and uncertain implications for HRD. We suggest that each scenario carries a glimpse of what might be.

Keywords: HRD; future search; apprenticeships; scenarios; HRD profession

Introduction

Even before the turbulent and unpredictable events of 2007/2008, the human resource development (HRD) profession's status, identity and territory was filled with contention (Mankin, 2001). In 2003, Gold, Rodgers, and Smith (2003) argued that as a socially constructed phenomenon, HRD professionals needed to be proactive in persuading clients of the legitimacy of their expert knowledge and potential to act in a field recognized as the disciplinary domain of learning and development at work. It was also argued that a key part of such expertise had to concern the values and interests of those who faced uncertainty and difficulty in relation to learning at work. In hindsight, perhaps the skills of critical thinking and challenge to assumptions should have been included (Rigg, Trehan, and Stewart 2006) as well as skills of futures thinking. Clearly, as we look towards 2020 and beyond, there is a need to reassess commonly held views about controlling events and give more emphasis to how we can create a future with creativity, imagination and not a little humility.

*Corresponding author. Email: j.gold@leedsmet.ac.uk

With these thoughts in mind, we consider our journey towards the four scenarios presented in this article. These resulted from a workshop at Leeds Metropolitan University in December 2011 which brought together a variety of stakeholders from all over the UK and Ireland to consider the future of HRD using a modified future search conference methodology (Weisbord and Janof 1996). This article, from one group attending the workshop, poses four future scenarios around the theme of city districts. We present these scenarios through a ‘hop-on, hop-off’ tour, inquiring into their implications for HRD and the journeys that could lead us towards the future. In the first section of the article, we consider some of the discussion that formed the impetus for the scenarios.

HRD – the past and present

Our group consisted of seven participants drawn from academe, university administration, HRD consultancy and practice. More importantly, we had all lived through different eras of the growth of HRD as a field and/or discipline. From our personal histories of HRD in a variety of roles and settings, principally in the UK since the 1980s, we could point to some key features of continuity as well as change and disturbance.

Firstly, we could see how HRD, like many other disciplines in the human realm, has been guilty of seeking to find solutions in an attempt to make HRD systematic, predictable, tangible and controllable. We can see this working at different levels where we could often see solutions seeking problems. Complexity and difficulty are simplified and reduced into models which become a series of steps or stages or models of how people ought to behave or perform. Perhaps a classic example is the systematic training model, which some of the group could recall as an approach that emerged in the 1960s, based on a four-stage process. Its beauty and simplicity was its normative thrust that implied logic and sequence in planning and action (Buckley and Caple 2007). Open the lid of any organization that claims to train, and some version of a systematic and planned approach will be presented and represented. We could easily see how such a linear view of training could remain blind to key contextual features that impact on training and learning at work that rely on the possibility of management support, but more likely a failure to support, as well the vagaries of culture and history (Chiaburu and Tekleab 2005). So systematic models that lead to linear thinking are no longer, if they were ever, fit for purpose. However, we see a continuation of this process in the continued use and popularity of competence models of behaviours, skills and/or outcomes. We noted the continuing confusion between various approaches. At leadership and management levels, any new move seems to eventually result in a normative framework of some kind, expressed as competences, attributes or similar. As Bolden and Gosling (2006, 160) suggested, ‘At best a competency framework will only ever be a simple representation of a highly complex and changing landscape’.

Outside organizations but clearly of influence inside, we have seen in the UK the development since the 1980s of a national qualifications framework underpinned by competences, where it is claimed that NVQs (and SVQs in Scotland) are directly relevant to employers’ needs since they are based on National Occupational Standards (NOS) set by employer-led standard-setting bodies. However, we noted that there have been long-standing doubts about the value of NVQs and their effectiveness in HRD (Grugulis 2003) and recent criticism that low level NVQs have

little use or value in the labour market even though they are undertaken by large numbers of 16/17 year olds (Wolf 2011).

The fall and rise of apprenticeships as a means of engagement and progression for young people is a characteristic of national HRD policy in the UK. The peak of apprenticeship activity followed the end of the Second World War. Contractual apprenticeships were drawn up with trade unions with a specified length of time that an apprentice should serve. These apprenticeships were generally the responsibility of employers or employers' associations and subject to very little state intervention or support (Fuller and Unwin 1999). A key feature of the apprenticeships in the post-war period was that they offered a sheltered and extended period in which the young person was able to grow up and become job ready (Vickerstaffe 2007). By the start of the 1960s, policy makers and employers were beginning to question the model of apprenticeship to deliver the skills that were necessary to meet the demand arising from industrial and technological change. Between 1960 and 1994, many new initiatives were developed to address some of the issues related to traditional apprenticeship. Industrial Training Boards, set up under a 1964 Act of Parliament, established among other things a tripartite approach (employers, unions and the state) to designing and managing apprenticeships which lasted for over 15 years. However, over time the status of apprenticeships eroded as industrial restructuring took place, the manufacturing industry in the UK declined, and the influence of trade unions waned. As a result there was a significant decline in apprentice numbers from 171,000 in 1968 to just 34,500 in 1990 (despite this, apprenticeship remained comparatively robust in a few sectors including manufacturing, construction, engineering and catering).

During the 1980s there emerged various schemes such as the Youth Training Scheme (YTS), introduced in 1983 and renamed Youth Training (YT) in 1989, mainly introduced to counter the drop in apprenticeships and marked rise in youth unemployment. These schemes however, often became associated with wider economic, social and political ends including cheap labour, social engineering, low educational value and the massaging of employment statistics (Ryan and Unwin 2001).

Partly as a response to this criticism, modern apprenticeships were introduced in 1994 for 16–24 year olds. They were designed to overcome some of the shortcomings of apprenticeships by ensuring that apprentices had employed status from the start and through Foundation Modern Apprenticeship (NVQ level 2) and Advanced Modern Apprenticeship (NVQ level 3 and key skills) to provide a route to intermediate, technical occupations. The government continued to reform apprenticeships which were increasingly seen as the major programme within government supported work-based learning programmes (Macleod and Hughes 2006). The National Skills Strategy (DfES 2003) proposed an 'end-to-end' review of apprenticeships which analysed the processes that link outcomes for trainees at one end with the underlying policy at the other. A couple of years later, a further skill White Paper placed a strong emphasis on the role of employers. This signalled a policy shift towards a 'demand-led' skills agenda, with employers playing a much greater role in the design and development of apprenticeships (DfES 2005). Following the Leitch Review (HM Treasury 2006) a major investment in apprenticeships was announced to support both expansion and quality improvement but later that year a House of Commons Committee criticized apprenticeships and recommended a need to review and change the system (Select Committee on Economic Affairs 2007). After a review

(DIUS 2008), the government reinforced its commitment to apprenticeships and announced the establishment of a National Apprenticeships Service.

The election of a new government in 2010 reaffirmed the policy commitment to apprenticeships. In 2010, Pearson Work Based Learning, working in partnership with a range of large employers including BT, Npower, Premier League and Whitbread, launched a new brand of Apprenticeship combining the established BTEC brand with a number of technology solutions. Other influential employers including Asda, McDonalds and Morrisons launched their own apprenticeship programmes with McDonalds set to become the UK's largest apprenticeship provider. These developments have not been met with universal approval, and the quality and value of this training has been questioned.¹

The Government's Strategy Document *Skills for Sustainable Growth* (BIS 2011) placed apprenticeships at the heart of the system and announced additional funding to expand the number of adult Apprenticeships available (to 200,000 p.a.) and to develop clear progression routes into Level 3 Apprenticeships, and routes from Level 3 Apprenticeships to higher level skills, including Level 4 Apprenticeships or Higher Education. Nevertheless, the Review of Vocational Education (Wolf 2011) recognized that, on the one hand that there remain problems with the apprenticeship system whilst on the other hand, that high-quality apprenticeships offer tremendous opportunities for development.

Over the last few decades, the nature of apprenticeships has changed considerably. They are no longer principally a route into skilled work for young men; instead they have become something that is offered to young women in low-paid service work. In part, this shift is the result of changes to the structure of the economy. But it is also the unintended consequence of government targets to increase the number of apprenticeships in England. At the same time, there remain concerns about the quality of apprenticeships, particularly in non-traditional sectors. The Wolf Review highlighted the need to guard against low quality training and there remains a need to ensure that those seeking to expand the quantity of apprenticeships do not do so at the expense of quality. This will require as big a focus on the quality of apprenticeships in the next few years as there has been on quantity in the recent past (IPPR 2011).

A long-standing difficulty for HRD has been the failure to demonstrate a return on investment (ROI) on activities. Models of evaluation have a tendency to follow a similar linear logic to the systematic view of training we referred to above, with Kirkpatrick's (1983) stages or levels model setting a framework. However, as many have found, the in-built linearity of the model, has proven difficult to implement beyond an immediate reaction level following learning activities. For many HRD activities, such as leadership development and interpersonal skills, it soon becomes apparent that a return to work makes it difficult to show causality in terms of transferring learning. This difficulty has been repeated time and again and research suggests that the act of learning alone is not sufficient for training to be considered efficient (Grossman and Salas 2011). Of particular concern are the various culture and contextual factors that could enable behaviour change and added value from HRD but are also just as likely to inhibit and prevent. These include motivational factors, the preparedness of learner and their beliefs, support or sanctions from others and the ability to apply new skills and decide on aspects of work design (Holton et al. 2007). These are certainly difficult aspects of work context to deal with if HRD acts alone and suggest the need for holistic evaluation which allows different

stakeholders to influence what is valued and measured and how (Thorpe et al. 2009). However, this is difficult to do and requires a more considered and systemic (not just systematic) approach by HRD practitioners, perhaps working collaboratively with HRD researchers, to work out what can be valued and measured and how influence can be gained for learning and development. The recent enthusiasm for coaching (Garvey, Stokes, and Megginson 2009) offers some promise here. But it is still important to show some connection to ROI, if only to prevent HRD activities being seen as cost rather than an investment. Particularly promising is recent research which shows the importance of learning capabilities in mediating the impact of HRM practices on organization performance (Camps and Luna-Arocas 2012).

Summary

We were struck by the endemic risk aversion within our culture which reinforces a short-term valuing of tangible and hard measures. These features have ‘dogged’ HRD and restricted its status, certainly in terms of its strategic impact and professional development. Today, HRD seems characterized by complexity and ‘wicked problems’ (Camillus 2008) that are not solvable through lever-pulling. Increasing youth unemployment worries us, as does graduate underemployment (Scurry and Blenkinsopp 2011). Problems seem to be escalating, and economic policies seem to be self-defeating; off shoring business and extending the retirement age may result in fewer jobs for young people. Paradoxically, young people are also those being creative through enterprise and social networking. They need to be enabled, yet institutions such as banks and universities are geared to dealing with the known and familiar. The HRD can support people on their developmental journeys, especially in partnership with ‘ambitious employers’ (UKCES 2009), if only they could be found. The HRD could become more influential by drawing on evidence of its effectiveness, especially from outside the UK.

Towards scenarios for the future

What could all this mean for the future of HRD? Based on our discussions, we moved to consider scenarios for the future of HRD. We proposed to develop four scenarios, based on approaches presented by the Global Business Network and Ringland (1996). We started by considering responses to two ‘burning questions’:

- Is there a future for HRD?
- Is HRD valued?

Our contrasting responses to two formed a matrix of four future scenarios as shown in Figure 1.

Based on these dimensions, four scenarios were developed as follows.

City centre

- HRD seen as fundamental to organizations and society.
- HRD is intrinsically and extrinsically valued.

The metaphor of the *city centre* denotes centrality and visibility – being at the hub of events. In the city centre, therefore, it is accepted that HRD professionals play a

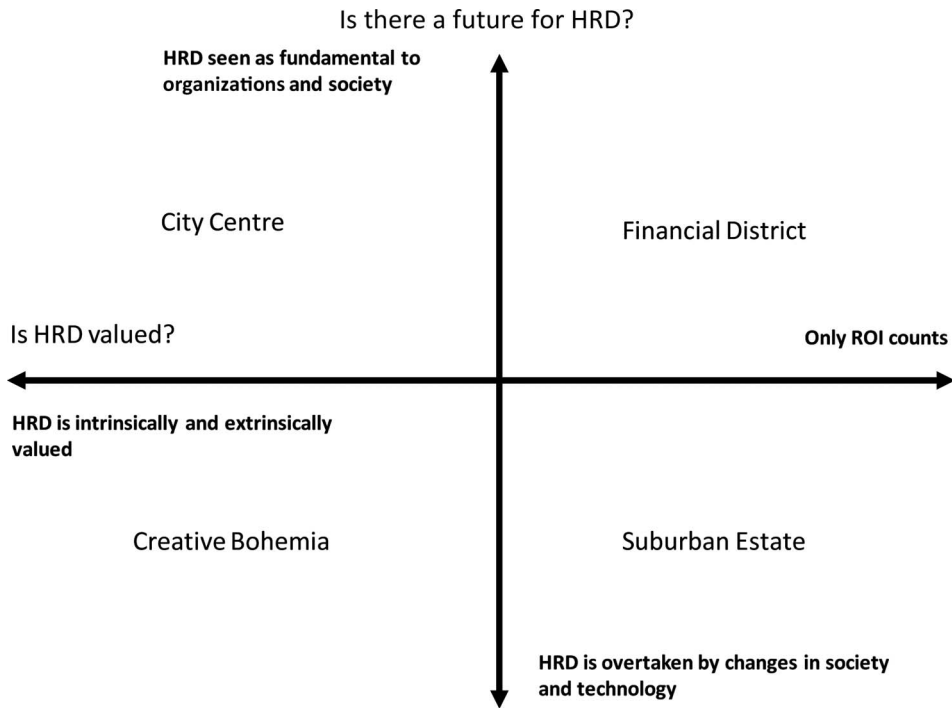


Figure 1. A matrix of four future scenarios.

significant role in organizations, alongside other professional areas such as Finance and Production Management. Far from being marginalized as a ‘soft’ activity, HRD makes a clear and obvious strategic contribution to business success in the ways envisaged by Garavan (2007). Of course this means a corresponding increase in pressure to perform, underpinned by the ability to capture and promote discourse on the tangible and intangible value.

The value of learning and development is widely accepted, not just by organizations but also by government and by society as a whole, allowing individuals to realize and reach their potential. In organizations, this approach creates the clear link or ‘golden thread’ (as described in public organizations), between corporate objectives, individual activities and learning and development needs. Even in the absence of hard data to demonstrate the impact of HRD on the bottom line, it is accepted as important for the vitality of any organization and central to the business and workforce strategies. In summary, HRD is seen as a foundation for business, and as a necessary and positive solution rather than as an overhead cost.

In such an environment, creativity and innovations in learning and development can flourish as do the individuals who experience and participate in them. Organizations and individuals engage in continuous learning. Practices such as action learning, coaching and organizational development are mainstream, laying the foundations for talent and succession planning. What emerges is a shared acceptance for development and learning with a shift towards individual responsibility impacting and reshaping the ‘psychological contract’ such that learning and development forms part of the expectations of the overall rewards package (both tangible and intangible).

Programmes of management and business education that utilize innovative learning and development practices are widespread. One example is the Finnish 'Team Academy', an enterprise-based business degree (Leinonen, Partanen, and Palviainen 2004) based at Jyväskylä University of Applied Sciences. There, undergraduate students (currently 60 per intake) gain a business degree by running real businesses. They learn by doing and by reflecting on action, supported by experienced coaches. Team Academy provides powerful, real-world professional learning and produces highly confident and capable graduates. It has a successful track record over 17 years in Finland, and has been taken up elsewhere in Europe, including Mondragon University (Spain).

For HRD professionals, such centrality and visibility requires and demands the capabilities to operate in this strategic context whilst creating fit for purpose business processes which underpin the environment in which they operate.

Financial district

- HRD seen as fundamental to organizations and society.
- Only ROI counts.

In the *financial district*, HRD is embedded in institutions of all kinds, including government, and led by HRD professionals. It is important but only where it demonstrates tangible ROI. As in the financial centre of a city, money talks; money also provides the resources for HRD to maintain pace with technology. Life in the Financial District is challenging for the HRD function, primarily as a result of the difficulty in demonstrating ROI for people centric activity.

Specifically, the main challenge is to attribute direct causality between benefits (returns) and the HRD activity (investment) designed to elicit them. In most organizations, HRD has to be systematic and prove its value. This means that HRD activity has to focus primarily on those activities where the effects can be linked to causes so that it is easier to attribute direct linearity between them. Technical programmes with clearly identified and measurable outcomes are most popular as are controllable activities that can be undertaken from the latest Web-enabled tools. For more complex activities, such as leadership development, in most organizations this has been reduced to a quick fix but measureable approach. It is still seen as fundamental but more lengthy programme in soft HRD areas cannot meet the ROI criteria. The exception is where organizations support a collaborative approach to improving the ROI on such programmes by progressively tackling the difficult constraints that would previously prevent performance improvement over time. However, even this process is inherently blind to any benefits derived from unanticipated outcomes may be somewhat oblique in nature, and therefore, simply not measured.

If we assume that fiscal Return is the primary motive of the HRD function in the Financial District, there is a strong possibility that such strong emphasis on financial tangibility might result in unpredictable, and perhaps negatively perceived functional behaviour, which limits HRD offerings to those seen as previously 'tried and tested', and which conform to the organizational conception of demonstrable Return, or which can be most easily measured. This also leads to degree of politicking to demonstrate functional value, in the interests of functional self preservation.

Considered in a macro-organizational sense, companies seek to secure longevity through minimizing risk and attempting to guarantee ROI – classically, this being

the role of the strategy and marketing functions. If these functions were able to reduce unpredictability to the extent sought by the organization, then we would expect to see continuous organizational longevity and HRD acquires the ability to influence decisions, albeit on the terms dictated by the overarching need to show a positive ROI. This set the terms for HRD activity at local levels, where in world of virtual and distributed teams, line managers take their responsibility seriously for supporting learning and fulfilling the need for impact.

The government is happy to support apprenticeships to relieve any difficulties arising from youth unemployment but expects organizations to take responsibility once trainees can be accommodated within normal processes that show a positive ROI.

Bohemia

- HRD is intrinsically and extrinsically valued.
- HRD is overtaken by changes in society and technology.

Responsibility for HRD is implicit in everything in *Bohemia*, in that it is intrinsic to the business activity as well as the social lifestyle. It tends to be vibrant, innovative, sometimes anarchic and self-organizing but as a recognized profession, it has disappeared or been subsumed into other locations of expertise. It allows freethinking, challenges the norms and pursues more artistic and social rather than economic goals. The deliberate lack of explicit or rigid structures enables innovation to thrive attracting those of similar disposition keen to inhabit a similar creative lifestyle. It is driven by innovation and supported by high levels of technology, social media and dynamic interaction.

Creative entrepreneurs in Bohemia have little time, nor inclination to embark on formal HRD, training or a full time course. They prefer to ‘dip in and out’ as required, confident that their experience of others in Bohemia, will provide a source of knowledge, reassurance and comfort when faced with challenges and barriers. Not all will be entrepreneurial, some are content to focus on developing their own practice, having little desire to expand their remit, fame or finance, and reluctant to consider employing people.

Bohemia is famed for having the capacity for collaboration, co-creation and networking, driven by the urge to make things happen, inspired and catalysed by creative work. Entrepreneurialism is an iterative process honed by learning and experience. Derelict or unused ‘transient’ spaces are attractive by keeping costs low, so for example are coffee houses and pubs where they are key social spaces of discourse, learning, developing ideas, seeking resources and doing business (Eikhof and Haunschild 2006).

Networks are vital in Bohemia, whether social or virtual and criss-cross interweaving the social as well as the world of work. This high-density clustering of similar, compatible competing and co-creating practitioners live co-dependent on one another for each other’s survival – not unlike the ‘liquid network’ of the coral reef (Johnson 2010). This close proximity makes innovation flourish at a faster pace.

This is dependent on self-management, self and peer learning and focussed on developing a portfolio and reputation rather than gaining credentials and qualifications. Human resource development is gained through experience and practices, through the sharing of knowledge and opportunities through thick

networks (Broadbent 2003), information networks, co-working spaces and ideas. Independence is cherished with a resistance to organizational incentive schemes proffered in the Finance District. Its based on individual performance; devotion to work and creative production; networking in trust; being mobile and moving from project to project. In doing so, new skills are developed, applied and refined on a regular and relevant basis.

The very nature of HRD within Bohemia therefore is implicit in the experienced creative practitioner. It is manifested in those who have currency in their experiences and/or innovative ideas. However, the lack of an organizational structure or 'organizational memory' threatens the sustainability and succession planning, unless informal and appropriate mechanisms and relevant networks are in place to capture the knowledge and expertise of the Bohemia District.

This district is a vital area to nurture – often described as belonging to the 'knowledge intensive industries' it has been observed as being the least threatened by economic crises and more resilient to external shocks (United Nations (UN) 2010). This is possibly due to its products being consumed as part of the wider districts' lifestyle and often in the home and also because they are able to respond quickly and strongly in the market place due to their flexibility and creative dynamic.

Developing and maintaining high-level skills are essential in Bohemia and traditional HRD processes are not flexible, responsive or innovative enough to respond. This is why HRD remains intrinsic and extrinsic.

Suburban estate

- HRD is overtaken by changes in society and technology.
- Only ROI counts.

In the *suburban estate*, HRD is only valued where it makes a direct and measurable contribution to social and organizational problems. It is dispersed, in that HRD happens informally in workplaces according to need more than through established professional HRD services because such services are no longer valued.

Because of the need to always show a positive ROI, HRD activities are highly standardized and widely available. Over the last decade, like other professional activities, HRD has become deskilled and can be delivered by and through a variety of media, often at minimum cost.

There is a need to show value, as with all other facets of the organization. As a consequence, the very logic of delivery is short term and focused on performance measurement. The professional status of HRD is difficult to maintain because the basis of its power to deal with complexity faced by others no longer exists; instead, all solutions to such problems are available quickly and cheaply elsewhere. The HRD's previous expertise is no longer recognized in the form of a professional person. People can satisfy their learning needs from a variety of open sources but what is available is of uniform quality. Further, because competition and piracy are so embedded, and intellectual property cannot be defended, quality is compromised in order to hold down prices. On the suburban estate, attempts are made to create an impression of difference and even superiority but all such efforts are a facade, hiding the uniformity of learning activities that are available for all.

The HRD's influence has been reclaimed by those who can turn the easy principles of learning into measureable outcomes and claim responsibility for its

achievement. Because HRD knowledge can be obtained by all, it becomes ubiquitous (Collins and Evans 2007).

The HRD's decline in society has also meant a reversal for those involved in supporting the advance of the profession. Since all HRD knowledge is now 'public' (Eraut 2000), and specialized practice is severely limited, there is a break in the dynamic between theories and what Cheetham and Chivers (2001, 381) called 'technically grounded extemporization' that can only occur in situations of challenging practice. Thus, the flow of new knowledge for the advance of the profession is stymied.

While incidental learning at work is still bound to occur, the difficulty in making this available for others and the insensitivity of measurement mean that such learning remains within the situation of practice, as with the original meanings of communities of practice. In some parts of the suburb however, there is a vibrant knowledge sharing community but few organizations have the skills to release its availability.

Summary

Scenarios are not forecasts. With this warning, it is necessary to treat those developed here as informed speculations. However within each, there is a glimpse of what might be, based on the language of the present. The four quadrant approach often produces polar opposites and unusual combinations which could be paradoxical. Thus, the financial district, which shows an acceptance of the value of HRD but still insists on measuring that value in terms of ROI. As Phillips and Phillips (2007) show, it is quite possible to achieve such a measure if there is a well developed evaluation framework and process which makes clear what types of data can and will be collected and can isolate the effects of programmes so they be assigned a monetary value. However, such a process is not easily achieved but some organizations would be willing to invest in the achievement of measurement and would thereby enhance the HRD profession's credibility. In the city centre scenario, because of the intrinsic value given to HRD, such elaboration may not be necessary. Credibility for the profession is gained in a variety of ways, including ROI but also against other measures which reflect the interests of different stakeholder, who all want to support HRD. Because of the openness of everyone to new possibilities, HRD professionals can engender experimentation which, based on good judgement, can provide for a generative process of learning and knowledge creation.

Bohemia provides for similar creative possibilities but, because society and technologies can do it better, HRD professionals are needed less. Part of this is due to the collaborative technologies which have advanced but mainly it is due to the acceptance of responsibility to make HRD work by those who in previous times might have been antagonistic. By contrast, in the suburban estate, such responsibility may be accepted but the measurement factor is highly constraining on what can be done, and so produces an efficient and cost efficient HRD but very uniform and unexciting. We have to ensure that the suburban estate is not the last stop on the tour.

Note

1. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/education/2012/feb/06/apprenticeships-under-scrutiny>.

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