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HRD in SMEs – A research agenda whose time has come

As can be seen from its website, and reiterated in numerous editorials (e.g. Anderson, 2017; Nimon, 2017; Reio & Werner, 2017), Human Resource Development Quarterly (HRDQ) provides a central focus on Human Resource Development (HRD) issues as well as the means for disseminating empirical research across the breadth of the discipline. Furthermore, the listing of keywords on its website indicates the importance HRDQ places on knowing more about learning in workplace settings as it includes words and phrases such as “workplace issues”, “workplace learning”, “organizational studies” and “workplace performance”. This is in line with general increased interest in organizational learning in recent years (Higgins & Aspinall, 2011). Therefore it is concerning that HRDQ seldom reports on an area of workplace learning in a sector which, in many countries throughout the world, encompasses approximately 99% of all businesses, provides over 50% of employment and can generate around 50% of national turnover (CIPD, 2015; Coetzer & Perry, 2008; European Commission, 2016; Federation of Small Businesses, 2015; Hamburg, Engert, Anke & Marin, 2008; Matlay, 2014; Mellett & O’Brien, 2014; UK Parliament, 2014; USA Census Bureau, 2012). If you have not yet guessed, this area of learning, which is vital to economies across the globe, occurs in Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs). Consequently in this editorial we seek to explore the extent of this omission, not only in HRDQ and but also in other journals, and then investigate possible reasons for this. We hope that by emphasizing both the importance of, and the lack of reported research into, HRD in SMEs we will encourage further dialogue and submissions related to this important topic.

Extent of the coverage

The starting point for our research was to ascertain the extent of the coverage of HRD in SMEs in HRDQ. An online search of all 112 issues since its inception 29 years ago showed only 10 articles which specifically related to research into HRD in SMEs (Ardichvili, Harmon, Cardozo, Reynolds & Williams, 1998; Fazzari & Mosca, 2009; Lans, Biemans, Mulder & Verstegen, 2010; Lans, Verhees & Verstegen, 2016; Michna, Kmieciak & Burzyńska-Ptaszek, 2017; Nolan & Garavan, 2016a; Rowden, 2002; Rowden, 1995; Saunders, Gray & Bristow, 2017; Uçanok & Karabatı, 2013; Wright & Nasierowski, 1994). Although some authors include research into HRD in SMEs, as well as larger organizations, (e.g. Alhejji, Garavan, Carbery, O’Brien & McGuire, 2016), others seem to ignore smaller

organisations completely. The latter includes Egan, Yang and Bartlett (2004), who, drawing upon Watkins and Marsick (1993), note that “larger organizations were more likely to dedicate resources and HRD professionals to the systematic consideration of organizational learning culture and practices” (p287) and so sited their research in large companies.

However, it is important to realize that a dearth of articles concerning HRD in SMEs is not peculiar to HRDQ. Nolan and Garavan’s (2016b) systematic literature review of research into HRD in SMEs examined 31 journals (including HRDQ) from 1995 to 2014 and found only 117 relevant items. Furthermore, informal discussions with some journal editors indicates that few manuscripts concerning HRD in SMEs are submitted for consideration. Therefore, we sought to discover the reasons for such negligible empirical evidence of learning and development in SMEs being published (Admiraal & Lockhorst, 2009; Beaver & Hutchings, 2005; Kelliher & Henderson, 2006; Nolan & Garavan, 2016b) which we will now discuss.

Reasons for the lack of research and reporting

Having established the dearth of reporting of research into HRD in SMEs, we first had to consider whether this phenomenon, that is HRD in SMEs, actually occurs, before going on to explore why, if it does occur, it is so little researched and subsequently reported in academic journals. In 2002, Rigg and Trehan reported that “The prevailing wisdom on HRD in small firms is that not much is done” (p390). However, based on their ethnographic research into HRD in three SMEs, they concluded that HRD did occur in such organizations, but that it did not fit the narrow framework into which organizational learning and development was (then) traditionally placed. They attribute this ‘bad fit’ to both the informal nature of such HRD (Ekanem & Smallbone, 2007; Roy, 2009; Sambrook, 2003) and the inappropriateness of predominantly quantitative research techniques used to investigate it. Saru’s (2007) case-study of a Finnish SME echoes this, additionally noting the inappropriateness of scaling down large organisation learning methods for use in SMEs, as also found by Anderson and Boocock (2002), Billett (2001) and Hill (2004). Nolan and Garavan (2016b; 2011) agree that some research methods are unsuitable for research in smaller organizations, proposing the use of ethnography in future research into HRD in SMEs. They propose that such an in-depth, informal approach could lead to greater insights in this area, where context is so important, noting, “Building relationships with small firms... is therefore a prerequisite to forming respectful and trusting partnerships that will enhance the understanding of HRD from

multiple perspectives” (Nolan & Garavan, 2011, p11). Additionally they highlight the unsuitability of searching in SMEs for HRD which is skewed towards practices and activities that are more likely to be found in larger enterprises.

Context and problems

Learning within SMEs may not be apparent due to being contextualised in everyday practical applications, with learning occurring through, rather than on, the job (Geldenhuys & Cilliers, 2012; Gold & Thorpe, 2008; Hamilton, 2011; Higgins & Aspinall, 2011; Hill, 2004; Matlay, 2005; Rigg & Trehan, 2004). Such issues have been recognized for decades; Lave and Chaiklin (1993) claimed that "Learning is ubiquitous in ongoing activity though often unrecognised as such" (p5). Similarly Van Woerkom and Poell (2010), through their research into organizational learning in the Netherlands, consider social interaction to be inherent in workplace learning which consequently often makes it difficult to differentiate between learning and operational activities. The relevance of this to SMEs is further evident when it is realized that the range of activities typically undertaken by an SME is, through necessity, very broad and therefore learning is likely to be needed throughout the organization, not only in strategic areas, as is typical in larger organizations, but also, more usually, in response to operational needs (Ahlgren & Engel, 2011; Beaver & Hutchings, 2004; CIPD, 2015).

Saunders et al (2017) indicate the practical difficulties inherent in researching SMEs, particularly gaining access to such organizations and then to suitable people within them. Although these problems can occur when researching organizations of all sizes, this is particularly apparent in SMEs which are unlikely to be household names with prominent physical premises and more probably exist with little external awareness of their activities. Additionally such organizations typically have limited resources, particularly time, and so may not want to ‘waste’ these on taking part in academic research which appears unlikely to benefit them. We would recommend heeding Saunders et al’s (2017) advice on how to minimize such problems in research.

Another problem which can arise when researching SMEs is considering these organizations as a homogenous group; they are not, due to the very broad definition of the term. For example, the infrastructure and abilities needed to develop a suitable learning environment within a micro-SME, with less than ten employees, is likely to be very different in a mid-

sized SME, with between 100-150 employees, much less a Medium Enterprise with around 250 employees (Attwell, 2003; CIPD, 2015). In countries such as the USA where the definition is even broader (USA Census Bureau, 2012), encompassing organizations with up to 500 employees, these differences are likely to be even greater. Factors, other than size, which affect an SME's approach to learning include the industry/sector it is in, its maturity, the presence (or otherwise) of a Human Resources (HR) manager/department and the owner-manager's vision for the business and desire for it to grow, which will change as time progresses and as the organization grows (CIPD, 2015; Innes & Wiesner, 2012; Sambrook, 2003; Saunders, Gray & Goregaokar, 2014; Webster, Walker & Brown, 2005). Consequently, it is important to examine HRD in SMEs in context, noting the organization's size, structure and industry.

Constrained resources and informality

The constrained resources in SMEs, which have already been referred to, may arise from their operating in a less certain business environment than larger concerns and not having the latter's advantage of economies of scale (Anderson & Boocock, 2002; Hill, 2004; Jones, 2005). Consequently SMEs are especially conscious of costs, particularly concerning learning (Beaver & Hutchings, 2005; Hamburg & Hall, 2008; Matlay, 2014). It is also likely that, due to constrained resources and limited expertise, SMEs are unable to identify and purchase products and services relevant to their particular needs. This may be specifically problematic concerning HRD because of limited knowledge in this area as SMEs are unlikely to have a dedicated HRD, or even HR, specialist (Matlay, 2000; Stewart & Beaver, 2004).

Furthermore, few SMEs have a specific HRD budget (CIPD, 2014). These factors may add to the perception that SMEs do not have HRD functions and / or strategies. Indeed, recognition that SME success and/or growth may be restricted due to inadequate funding for HRD has led to various government-supported learning initiatives, although relatively few SMEs appear to have taken advantage of such schemes (Beaver & Hutchings, 2005; Department for Education and Skills, 2003; Devins, Gold, Johnson & Holden, 2005). For example, the Association of Labour Providers and Lifelong Learning UK's 2010/2011 survey (ALP & LLUK, 2011) indicated that only 29.1% of the surveyed SMEs availed themselves of SME-oriented learning provided by the UK Skills Funding Agency. Although low usage of such initiatives may arise from lack of awareness of their existence and/or relevance (Matlay, 1999), it may also be due to the rigidity of state-provided learning opportunities being

incongruent with SMEs' informality and spontaneity (Hill & Stewart, 2000). This is reinforced by Ahlgren and Engel's (2011) research into 12 English and Scottish production and service SMEs, through the European Sixth Framework Programme research project, which found that potential participants perceived "public funding as inaccessible and problematic" (p345).

There are indications that lack of resources have led to SMEs being characterized as cost-conscious, while the entrepreneurial origins of many of them encourage informality. Consequently HRD within SMEs is often reported as being informal (Ekanem & Smallbone, 2007; Roy, 2009; Sambrook, 2003), job-oriented (Ahlgren & Engel, 2011) and socially-situated, being based on common meaning and practice (Devins & Gold, 2002). The development and growth of a culture which encourages learning needs common language (Senge, 1990) and this may be particularly pertinent to SMEs, each of which often has its own unique language and customs (Devins & Gold, 2002). Gold and Thorpe's (2008) social constructionist case-study of Adam, an SME owner-manager hairdresser in northern England explores how conceptualization of HRD affects attitudes towards it. Adam's initial hostility and skepticism towards learning and development gradually change to enthusiasm as he is exposed to different types of HRD which allow him to develop his skills while realizing that he can choose learning methods which suit his needs and preferences. Gold and Thorpe (2008) emphasize that language used is "crucial to the development of more advanced forms of understanding" (p389). This indicates that inconsistencies in, and possible changes to, language may also contribute to the perception of low HRD in SMEs.

Future Directions for Research

Our research indicates that HRD does occur in SMEs, although not necessarily in the formal, traditional forms recognizable in larger organizations. However, this area remains under-researched and under-reported with calls for more research remaining largely unanswered. (Johnson, 2002; Kelliher & Henderson, 2006; Roberts & Sambrook, 2014). It is clear from our research that this issue is not specific to HRDQ; interest in HRD in the SME sector could be usefully reflected in all Academy-sponsored journals. Although there are acknowledged difficulties inherent in researching in SMEs, we would argue from our own research in this area (e.g. Short, 2016; Tam & Gray, 2016) that the more unusual, and at times unexpected, forms of HRD found in SMEs is precisely what makes research in this area so interesting and

–dare we say?! – fun. We suggest that researchers into HRD in SMEs should expect the unexpected, as well as adding to what is currently a very limited body of knowledge.

Another concern of ours is that the majority of the scant previous research into HRD in SMEs has been conducted from the perspective of owner-managers (Admiraal & Lockhorst, 2009; Higgins & Mirza, 2011; Higgins, Mirza & Drozynska, 2013; Saunders et al, 2014; Susomrith & Coetzer, 2015; Thorpe, Holt, Pittaway & Macpherson, 2005). Consequently we would like to suggest that research that goes beyond their perspective is needed in order to give a more holistic, interpretive view of HRD in SMEs. Furthermore, as we have indicated above, research in SMEs needs the use of more imaginative and flexible research methods than have often been used previously. Consequently we would very strongly encourage HRD scholars to not only consider researching HRD in SMEs, but also to explore different perspectives and methodologies for such research. A whole world of opportunities exists for research exploration so we hope that those in the HRD field will take up this exciting challenge. We also hope that HRDQ might become the 'destination of choice' for good quality studies of HRD in SMEs as a feature of the journal's contribution to the advancement of scholarship across the entire spread of the HRD field.

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