

3 Methodology

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The theoretical framework of HRD's role, as outlined in the Chapter 2, has very limited empirical validation, since it is based only on a literature study and two small national case study research projects. Moreover, it is unclear whether the framework is valid for the European situation, since much of the literature on which it is based is of American origin, and empirical data were only collected in the Netherlands. Therefore, to clarify the European outlook on HRD in learning-oriented organisations (the main objective of this study), data were collected in seven European countries, using a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods.

In the first phase of the project, case study research was the main method. The aim was to gain an in-depth understanding of the concepts of the HRD departments, the strategies they adopt to turn these into practice and the facilitative factors as well as the difficulties they encounter during this implementation process. The design of the case study research is described in the section on 'Case study design and realisation'.

In the second phase of this study, a survey was conducted with a larger group of organisations, to ascertain to what extent the case study findings are representative of organisations throughout the seven EU countries that participated in the study. The second section describes the design and implementation of this survey.

Case study design and realisation

Research questions

The questions guiding data collection were:

- 1 How do HRD departments in learning-oriented organisations throughout Europe envision their own role in stimulating and supporting employees to learn continuously as a part of everyday work (with the intention of contributing to organisational learning, and thus enhancing organisational competitiveness)?
- 2 What strategies do European HRD departments adopt to realise their envisioned role?
- 3 What factors inhibit the realisation of this new role? How do HRD practitioners cope with these factors?
- 4 What factors facilitate the realisation of HRD's new role?

Selection of cases

For the case studies, it was decided to select companies with over 500 employees from the population of learning-oriented organisations in the seven participating countries. The reason to limit the study to larger organisations is that these often have a more clearly discernible HRD function than small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). To select suitable case studies, preliminary research was conducted in each country. On the basis of studies already conducted (e.g. Leys, Wijngaerts and Hancké, 1992; Stahl, Nyhan and d'Ajola, 1993; Tjepkema and Wognum, 1995), it was possible to operationalise the concept of the learning-oriented organisation, to identify characteristics against case studies could be selected.

The next step was the selection of possible case organisations. A variety of methods was used, such as scanning recent literature for case descriptions, scanning conference announcements and using personal networks of the researchers. After a comparison at project level (e.g. to see if the cases complemented each other well), the selected organisations were then approached for a telephone interview. For the interview, a checklist of selection criteria was constructed, which was used by all partners.

Characterisation of case study organisations

The aim of the initial telephone interview was to establish whether the organisations were willing to participate in the project and whether they met the most important selection criterion: can they be seen as good examples of learning-oriented organisations? For instance, do they value employee learning, provide facilities for (informal) employee learning, value and support the acquisition of learning skills? Other important criteria were whether the HRD tasks were carried out in a proactive way (either by managers, HRD professionals or others), whether there was a clear vision on the role of HRD (professionals) in the organisation, and whether the organisation undertook interesting and innovative initiatives to support employee (and even organisational) learning. The aim was not to create a representative group, but to select 'good examples' of learning-oriented organisations with a proactive HRD function, since it is from such examples that the most interesting lessons can be learned. In case study research, this is a more fruitful approach than to select representative organisations. Also, it was impossible to create a representative group, given the small size of the sample.

Following this procedure, a total of twenty-eight cases were selected: four cases in each of the seven participating countries (Belgium, Finland, France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom). As far as possible, each partner selected two cases from the service sector and two from the manufacturing sector, to enable a comparison between these two types of companies. To further facilitate comparison, the researchers tried, as far as possible, to select cases between 500 to 1,000 employees. Sometimes it was not the whole company that was selected as a case, but one division or a single establishment. This proved to be difficult for some companies, so some of the cases are larger than 1,000 employees. A short description of the twenty-eight cases is provided in Table 3.1.

Table 3.1 Overview of case organisations

<i>Country</i>	<i>Case organisation</i>	<i>Core business</i>
Belgium	1. DVV 2. Siemens Atea 3. Alcatel Bell 4. ISS Cleaning service	Insurance Telecommunications Telecommunications and multimedia
Finland	5. Vaisala 6. Valmet paper machinery 7. Okobank Group, central cooperative 8. Outokumpu Zinc	Meteorology Paper machinery manufacturing Financial services (banking) Metal production
France	9. Motorola 10. Auchan Bordeaux 11. Accor 12. GT group	Production of telecommunication equipment and electronic components Retail (hypermarket) Hotel and tourism services Road transport
Germany	13. Bosch Siemens Hausgeräte 14. Hoechst Schering AgrEvo 15. Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit 16. Sony Germany	Domestic appliance manufacturing Chemicals production Consultancy (in technical areas) Marketing and sales electronic devices
Italy	17. Barilla 18. Bayer 19. Lever 20. Datalogic	Food industry Chemical pharmaceutical industry Cosmetics manufacturing Bar-code manufacturing
The Netherlands	21. Akzo Nobel, BU Salt 22. Ericsson Telecommunication, R&D department 23. BAC (IT centre Internal Revenue Service) 24. KIBC, BU Utility Building	Mineral extraction and production Telecommunication IC-T products and services Construction industry
United Kingdom	25. Royal Mail, Nottinghamshire, operational unit 26. Rolls-Royce Aerospace, Airline Business Operations 27. Royal Scottish Assurance 28. Wolverhampton & Dudley Breweries	Postal services Aero engine manufacturing Financial services (insurance) Brewery (beer production and retail)

Data collection

After having selected suitable case organisations, all partners collected data and compiled a case report for each organisation. Data collection, conducted in 1998, involved a variety of methods to enhance reliability of the findings (a process commonly known as

triangulation; see Yin, 1984). To gain insights into the ways HRD departments view their own role in the firm (research question 1) researchers conducted:

- an in-depth interview with the head of the HRD department (as the person who maps the vision and sets out the general course of the department);
- a study of relevant documents (such as mission statements, HRD policy and plans).

The interview as well as the document study focused on the vision of the HRD professionals with regard to their own role in the organisation (what contribution does the HRD function want to make, how would it like to make it, how do the HRD specialists regard the cooperation with line managers and employees, etcetera).

To gather information on the strategies the departments adopt to realise the proposed role (research question 2), and the facilitative and inhibiting factors with regard to this process (research questions 3 and 4) researchers conducted:

- in-depth interviews with the head of the HRD department and (some of the) HRD professionals;
- interviews with approximately five line managers and approximately five employees;
- a study of relevant documents (such as instruments, function descriptions, information on training methods etc.).

The purpose of these interviews and the document study was to gain insight into the strategies HRD professionals employ to realise their envisioned role: how do they seek to enact their vision? These strategies might contain, for example, experiments in new methods for HRD strategy formulation, changes in the approach to training, changes in the way the department is organised (for example, by positioning HRD officers close to line management).

It was considered important to interview not only HRD professionals on the proposed strategy of the HRD department, but also line management and employees, for two reasons. First, line management and employees are likely to notice the effects of the new strategies of the training department. Second, from what is now known on HRD departments in learning-oriented organisations, training and development is not only a task of HRD officers, but also of line management and employees. Therefore, it was necessary to gain insight into the way they view these (relatively new) tasks.

Interviews

Four key variables can be recognised in the research questions: the organisational context (learning-oriented organisation), the vision of the HRD function, strategies employed to realise the envisioned role and influencing factors. All of these variables were worked out in topic lists, which were used by the researchers to conduct the interviews. The theoretical framework, as described in Chapter two, was used as a

basis to guide the questions. As described earlier in this section, four types of respondents ('roles') were interviewed for each case:

- HRD managers;
- HRD practitioners;
- line managers;
- employees.

Document analysis

Interviews constituted the most important means for data collection. However, it was also important to analyse relevant documents. The main objective was to verify if answers to questions regarding the vision of the HRD department and strategies the department adopt to realise these visions are actually laid down in formal documents. Documents were also used to collect further information of interest for the research. Examples of relevant documents are: mission statements; organisational policy and plans; HRD policy and plans; training plans; information on training methods; information on responsibilities towards employee/organisational learning; job descriptions; and evaluation reports.

Data analysis

For a thorough analysis of the data, first a within case analysis was conducted by all partners, prior to writing the case study reports. Second, a cross case analysis was performed, both per country and overall, by the project management team. For these analyses, the matrix technique described by Miles and Huberman (1981) was used (see also Yin, 1984). The partners provided matrix reports of their cases to the project management team, in addition to their written reports.

Survey design and realisation

Respondents

The primary respondents for the survey were HRD directors/HRD managers: those with a strategic/managerial role in the HRD function. Because of their overall view of the HRD function, they were able to answer all the questions (on vision as well as on strategies). In case of very large organisations, the HRD function at the division level or a large establishment was selected, not the HRD function at the corporate level. In order to optimise response rates, respondents were approached by phone first, to ask whether they were willing to fill out the questionnaire (a 'warm approach'). If respondents agreed to participate in the study, questionnaires were subsequently sent by mail. The Italian partners considered a telephone survey more appropriate for the situation in their country. Therefore, in Italy, the survey was conducted by telephone, using the same questionnaire as in other countries.

Questionnaire

The questionnaire addressed the same topics as the case study research:

- organisational context;
- vision of HRD function on own role;
- strategies to realise envisioned role;
- inhibiting and facilitating factors.

The questionnaire also included some descriptive questions (on the organisation, HRD function, respondent etc.). The project management team drew up a first draft of the questionnaire, using the results of the case studies, topic lists from the interviews and other HRD surveys. Project partners were asked to provide feedback and ECLO asked twenty-six of its corporate members to fill out the questionnaire as a pilot test. On the basis of the pilot and feedback of the partners, the questionnaire was finalised.

Sample

As in the case study research, the survey was aimed at HRD departments in large (500 employees or more) organisations, which can be considered to be learning-oriented organisations. The primary objective of the survey was to verify case results. Therefore, it was important to select organisations according to the same selection criteria, namely:

- there is reason to assume the company can be regarded a learning oriented organisation (or aspires to be one);
- the company has an HRD function;
- the company has at least 500 employees.

Large organisations were chosen because these usually have a specialised HRD unit with an explicit view on its own role within the firm. Though this may also hold true for some smaller companies, the survey was conducted in large companies only, in order to facilitate comparison of results. The desired number of organisations participating in the survey was approximately 140 (twenty per country). Of course, this is a rather limited number, but the number of learning-oriented organisations was estimated to be relatively small at the outset of this study. Although the total population of learning-oriented organisations with a pro-active HRD department is estimated to be small, this situation is somewhat different for each of the participating countries. As some of the partners found it easier than expected to find suitable organisations who were willing to participate, for some countries the number of respondents was higher than planned. The questionnaire was eventually completed by respondents from 165 companies during 1999. Table 3.2 provides an overview.

Characterisation of survey participants

As mentioned above, the survey was directed at companies with over 500 employees. In order to achieve a large enough sample, a number of somewhat smaller organisations

Table 3.2 Number of questionnaires from each participating country

Country	Questionnaires	
	Number	%
The Netherlands	17	10
Belgium	39	24
Finland	19	12
Germany	27	16
France	22	13
United Kingdom	20	12
Italy	21	13
Total	165	100

Table 3.3 Organisational size

Size	Companies	
	Number	%
0–500 employees	41	25
501–2500 employees	39	24
2501–5000 employees	23	14
Over 5000 employees	56	34
Missing data	6	4
Total	165	101*

Note: * over 100% due to rounding

were also selected, although there were no ‘small’ companies. Also, researchers checked whether the company had an HRD function (another important selection criterion). Table 3.3 provides an overview of the size of the companies participating in the survey.

The most sizeable group of participating companies consisted of particularly *large* firms (over 5,000 employees). In such cases, a large establishment was usually asked to participate in the survey. About a quarter of the companies were relatively *small* (under 500), and another quarter were of *average* size (between 500 and 2,500). The rest (fourteen per cent) consisted of between 2,500 and 5,000 employees.

Most companies participating in the survey (thirty-eight per cent) had a *division structure*, and about a quarter (twenty-six per cent) had a *functional structure*. Other organisational forms were also represented in the sample, but only by very small portions of organisations. Table 3.4 provides an overview. It is worth noting the relatively large number of missing values (or data) (seventeen per cent): either respondents failed to complete this question, or answered it in a way that could not be analysed.

As with the case studies, the aim was to create a sample in which *manufacturing and service sectors* were more or less equally represented. Table 3.5 shows that service organisations were slightly over-represented: half of the survey participants come from service companies (fifty per cent). Over a third of the companies were from manufacturing industries, or combine production and trade (thirty-seven per cent). A small proportion of companies are from the trade industry (seven per cent).

Table 3.4 Organisational structure

<i>Structure</i>	<i>Companies</i>	
	<i>Number</i>	<i>%</i>
Divisional organisation	62	38
Functional organisation	42	26
Network organisation	11	7
Project organisation	6	4
'Chain organisation'	1	1
Team organisation	1	1
Mix	14	9
Missing data	28	17
Total	165	100

Table 3.5 Organisational sector

<i>Sector</i>	<i>Companies</i>	
	<i>Number</i>	<i>%</i>
Manufacturing industry (production)	57	35
Service organisation for profit	58	35
Service organisation non-profit	25	15
Trade (buy and/or sell)	11	7
Industry and trade	4	2
Other/missing data	10	6
Total	165	100

Table 3.6 Organisation of HRD function

<i>Organisation of HRD</i>	<i>Companies</i>	
	<i>Number</i>	<i>%</i>
Centrally-positioned HRD department	65	39
Local HRD department(s)	12	7
Centrally-positioned HRD department and local HRD department(s)/Central and local HRD	8	5
Shared function of HRD staff and (line) managers	22	13
Shared function of HRD staff and competence managers	7	4
Shared function of HRD staff and external consultants	1	1
Shared function of HRD staff and corporate university (Central or local) HRD practitioner(s)/consultant(s), not in separate department	7	4
HRD tasks are performed by line managers, no specialised HRD staff	3	2
Other/missing data	37	22
Total	165	99*

Note: * under 100% due to rounding

An important question when considering the context of HRD is the way in which the HRD function is organised. Results for this question are presented in Table 3.6.

When considering the way in which the HRD function is organised in the companies participating in the survey, it becomes obvious that the most common organisational form is a *centrally positioned HRD department* (thirty-nine per cent), *(a) local HRD department(s)* (seven per cent) or *a combination of the two* (five per cent). A rather considerable portion of the companies organises the HRD function in a *form other than a separate department*. In those cases, HRD is most often a shared function of HRD staff and (line) managers (thirteen per cent). In relatively few companies, HRD is shared between HRD staff and either competence managers (four per cent), external consultants (one per cent) or a corporate university (two per cent). Sometimes HRD practitioners carry the responsibility for HRD alone (four per cent), and in some other cases, this responsibility lies with line managers, no specialised HRD professionals are employed in those firms (two per cent). Unfortunately, a rather large proportion of companies did not (adequately) answer this question. The percentage of missing values is rather high (twenty-two per cent).