Nichol, Lynn and Williams, Sue C (2014) Constructing professional identity-the experience of work based learning candidates. American Journal of Management, 14 (1/2). pp. 43-46.

This is the final published version of the following published document:

Nichol, Lynn and Williams, Sue C (2014).
Constructing professional identity-the experience of work based learning candidates. **American Journal of Management, 14 (1/2), 43-46.**

Published in American Journal of Management, and available online at:

http://www.na-businesspress.com/ajmopen.html

We recommend you cite the published (post-print) version.

The URL for the published version is http://www.na-businesspress.com/ajmopen.html

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Constructing Professional Identity – The Experience of Work Based Learning Candidates

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Previous research into professional identity has argued that training institutions shape professional formation. This research focuses on professionals who have undertaken a work based approach and explores the interrelationship between practitioners' own narrative of professional identity and that encoded within the narrative of the standards of a professional HR/HRD body. The findings begin to question the traditional understanding of the inter-relationship between the narrative of the professional body and individual HR/HRD practitioner narratives of identity suggesting that neither the professional body nor the mainstream educational institution are the major players in the development of professional identity.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

Previous research into professional identity has argued that training institutions shape professional formation by providing the knowledge base, the certification of technical competence and the official credentials for entry to professions (Muzio, Kirkpatrick & Kipping, 2011). Training for the profession in this scenario is completed prior to entry and is part of the socialisation process for the profession. This research investigates an alternative training and development process that of exploring the professional identity of senior HR/HRD practitioners who engage in a work based learning approach to gain their professional qualification in the middle of their career. The central objective of the research is:

> To explore the interrelationship between practitioners' own narrative of professional identity and that encoded within the narrative of the standards of a professional HR/HRD body.

WORK BASED LEARNING PROGRAMME

This paper reports the interim findings from phase one of an on-going study. The participants in the study are former candidates from a Professional Assessment Centre Programme (PAC) at one British university. PAC is a route to Chartered Membership of the professional HR/HRD body; The Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD). It is a work based learning route that employs the candidate's work experience to provide an evidential context for assessment against the professional

standards of CIPD. Attendance at formal classes is not part of the programme, an adviser meets regularly with the candidate throughout the process to discuss their evidence and facilitate reflection on the candidate's work based experience and the HR/HRD knowledge base. Students are assessed by a face-to-face professional discussion.

PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY

Traditionally research exploring professional identity in the US and UK has focused on redefining professional boundaries, particularly with the advent of new public service management (Bolton, 2005; Swailes, 2003). There has also been documentation of the emergence of the new commercialised professional and the tensions between the liberal and the managerially focused professions, (Noordegraaf, 2011). In criticising the dominance of these approaches, authors have begun to develop an alternative strand of work that explores the influence of the organisational context on identify (Faulconbridge and Muzio, 2008). It has been suggested that because of the changeability of the work environment it is no longer appropriate to define professional identity as a tripartite relationship between state, users and training institutions (Muzio, Kirkpatrick and Kipping, 2011). Baumann (2004) writes of current organisational times as creating the phenomenon of 'liquid identity', uncertain, fluid, out of which individual practitioners need to develop a sense of self, a personal view of what it means to be a professional. Pritchard and Symon (2011) describe the normative view of professionals as 'out of place in a more dynamic model of work'. They argue that the identity of a professional is not a label awarded after education and certification (Watson, 2002) but is 'an emergent, unpredictable and localized process' (p 96). Identity is constructed within and is contingent upon the local workplace. The work based learning route to professional qualification is embedded in the uncertain work place. Candidates are already experienced HR/HRD practitioners, who, in contrast to the traditional routes to professions, some years after entry to HR/HRD engage with the body of knowledge espoused by the gatekeeper to the profession, the professional body.

METHODOLOGY

The research is located in the interpretivist tradition using one-to-one semi-structured interviews. To-date, seven interviews have been conducted. The participants were all working in HR/HRD. The interviews explored their own HR/HRD identity, the perception of the characteristics of an HR/HRD professional and their engagement with the work based learning programme. The researchers are currently both academic HRD tutors but both with a practitioner background prior to an academic career. Therefore the influence of a post experience professional qualification on an individual's professional persona is germane to our own teaching practises and important to the wider understanding of the role of HRD.

DISCUSSION

We are reluctant to draw any firm conclusions from this research to date as we are unable to compare those who have undertaken work based and traditional routes to professional qualification without the completion of the next phases. However the interviews identify a number of experiences that provide insight into how individuals view their own identity, the contribution of work based learning and the influence of the professional body standards.

A common theme amongst the participants seems to be in seeing the qualification as a way of confirming expertise and building confidence. This confidence boost theme resonates strongly throughout the interviews. The participants identified that through undertaking work based learning they evaluated their professional practice formed in the organisational context, against the theoretical models of HR and the professional body's standards thereby self-validating their own practice.

Often the participants wanted to demonstrate that their expertise was comparable with their colleagues who had studied through the conventional pre-work experience route. Given the criticism and concern about the appropriateness of the traditional model of training for professionals by many authors, including Baumann (2004), Pritchard and Symons (2011) and Watson (2002) it is interesting to note that the participants perceived that the standards of the professional body were a valuable benchmark for their professional practice. Many of the participants had become involved in HR/HRD from very different career starting points and none had entered HR/HRD as a first choice career. Their formation mirrored the localised, fluid process suggested by Watson (2002) only seeking qualification once they were senior and experienced HR/HRD professionals. However local formation is not sufficient validation for the participants, who required external legitimisation of their experience through certification and self-legitismisation through reviewing their own practice and undergoing assessment. It was an opportunity to validate their experience by gaining membership of a professional body. One participant suggested that it was a way of gaining confidence that her experiences were legitimate, another described gaining her work based learning qualification as being given 'a seal of approval from the world'. It appears that although experienced HR/HRD practitioners the participants did not feel complete as a professional without the 'badge' of membership of a professional body. It is less clear whether the narrative of the professional body is more powerful than just granting a 'badge' that is valuable in difficult economic circumstances, or is strongly influential in joining with the organisational narrative to develop each practitioner's unique professional identity.

Despite developing their HR/HRD expertise in the workplace the participants had some common understandings of the characteristics essential for HR/HRD citing fairness and integrity as key attributes. Traditional models of professional formation would suggest that such shared understandings would be developed through prework education. None of the participants had taken part in formal HR/HRD education however all the participants identified specific colleagues in HR/HRD who had acted as mentors providing an alternative approach to developing professional characteristics than pre-work education.

Although sharing a common view on the ethical standpoint required in HR/HRD the participants described their role in many ways suggesting different perceptions of identity. One participant described herself as 'Queen Bee'; a sole HR practitioner in her organisation pursuing a role that is totally different from 'the role described in HR magazines'. She perceives her roles as 'paid to advise and point out the consequences if you continue down this path'. Working alone is both a structural feature of this participant's work and a way of working. She believes that the HR/HRD role should be 'slightly apart from everyone else'. She doesn't want to be 'drinking with someone one night and then having to sack them the next day'. Other participants describe their roles in different ways including change agent, strategic leader and a 'sign-post' enabling others to find solutions. In contrast to the participant who sees herself as slightly apart they emphasise the centrality of the HR/HRD role to others in the organisation. These different ideas appear to emerge from organisation context echoing Watson's (2002) view that professional identity is contingent on situation rather than educational experience.

This is further supported by the role of reflection in the PAC process. PAC candidates are required to reflect and evaluate the linkages between their own practice and the CIPD standards. The participants see reflection as central to confirming confidence in their own identity and role. For work based learning candidates consideration of the evaluation of their own practice against the standards of the professional body is a personal activity and confirmation that they have reached a professional standard. There is evidence in this research that the participants have differing roles and understandings of self, echoing Baumann's (2004) view that identity is liquid with each practitioner forming their own view of self. Participants sometimes found it difficult to locate themselves across the diverse range of standards expected by the professional body, supporting the notion that work based learning provided the opportunity for each practitioner to explore their own identity and then through the assessment make their individual and unique identity explicit to themselves.

IMPACT OF HRD ON PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY

Jorgenson and Henrikson (2011, p.138) argue that HRD has a role in 'bridging the gap' or sustaining 'the bonds between individuals, organisations and the contexts in which these organisations occur'; a role, therefore, in understanding the construction of professional identity. They argue that individuals experience their world through "the narrative forces by which individuals construct themselves as meaningful individuals in the world" (p131). They emphasise that individuals integrate their past, present and future through the process of narration. PAC could be described as an example of a process of narration, constructing the participants' reality but against a series of ordered, focused professionally developed narratives i.e. that of the CIPD standards. In terms of gaining the qualification, the evidence provided was but one selection of material to tell their story of competence; there could have been many others. However in studying the ways in which these professionals now relate to their organisations or situations as a result of gaining the qualification provides HRD practitioners with insights into how such programmes are or are not integrated into their organisational narratives and how the narrative of the professional body interrelates with the personal and organisational narrative of each practitioner. At a future stage the research might seek to explore the latent narrative of the development of their careers and satisfaction with their profession over time.

The findings from the research begin to question the traditional understanding of the inter-relationship between the narrative of the professional body and individual HR/HRD practitioner narratives of identity suggesting that neither the professional body nor the mainstream educational institution are the major players in the development of professional identity. It is not the academic that is central stage here but the interactions in the workplace and the HR/HRD mentors chosen by each individual practitioner.

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