

Line Manager Involvement in Human Resource Development

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Current models of human resource development (HRD) suggest that expectations about a line manager role in HRD are changing as organizations are striving to make the HRD function leaner and more strategic. In this context, line managers are increasingly held responsible and accountable for human resource development. Thus, this paper investigates the themes and implications, concerning the role of the line managers in human resource development. It also seeks to explore current developmental roles of line managers in Lithuanian government institutions and to define and discuss the factors inhibiting their greater involvement in HRD. The results of the research have revealed that line managers in government institutions of Lithuania have not assumed the responsibility for HRD. It was confirmed that it is difficult to fulfill this role, either because of their work load or lack of skills and management tradition in this area. It has been also concluded that substantial investments in capacity development of the line managers and HRD specialists are needed to make sure that line managers and HRD specialists are capable of carrying out their new roles.

Raktažodžiai: žmogiškųjų išteklių vadyba, žmogiškųjų išteklių vystymas, vidurinio lygmens vadovai, organizacijų vystymas.

Keywords: human resource management, human resource development, line managers, organizational development.

Introduction

Based on Tulgan [1] current organizational environment can be described as a “war for talent” and therefore concerns about retaining talent constantly increase an employees’ expectations about being developed by their managers. The best people are most likely to leave organizations if their interests are not accommodated; and the main reason to leave their jobs is dissatisfaction with how their skills and talents are developed, usually due to the poor quality of their relationship with their direct managers [2]. In this context line managers are becoming increasingly responsible for performing human resource developmental activities in order to facilitate employee learning and development.

Academic literature has suggested that line managers can play an important role in encouraging employee learning and development [3 - 6]. The concept of line managers assuming developmental roles such as learning facilitators or coaches has received considerable attention in recent years [26]. However, the HRD literature remains largely theoretical and rhetorical in encouraging line managers to take this responsibility. The reality so far is that this is the exception rather than real practice, since delegating HRD responsibility to line managers carries various problems and risks, which need to be carefully explored and seriously considered [4]. Despite the growing number of publications on the changing role of line manager to support HRD, there is a lack of empirical data on the actual implementation of the idea. What do line managers actually do to realize their HRD responsibility? And which factors promote or impede the performance of their HRD tasks? Thus, there is a convincing need for further research that studies the changing role and responsibilities of line manager and its implications for HRD.

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Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to examine the changing role and responsibilities of line manager, as well as possible implications of greater line manager involvement in HRD. In addition, it seeks to explore the line managers' role in HRD in Lithuanian government institutions and to define and discuss the factors which inhibit their greater involvement in HRD.

In this article a line manager is defined as a manager who is authorized to direct the work of subordinates and is responsible for accomplishing organizational goals [8]. He /she is directly accountable for obtaining results through people in his/her organization, in comparison to other employees, who do not have the same level of accountability and responsibility to senior management for the work of others.

A comprehensive analysis of the scientific literature was carried out for the theoretical exploration of the problem. This paper also draws on the empirical data obtained via doctoral research carried in 2006 to substantiate the theoretical model of the Human Resource Development System in the Context of Public Management Reform [7]. Empirical data gathered in the framework of this research were utilized to discuss and analyze the role of line managers in government institutions of Lithuania. Qualitative and quantitative research methods were applied in the doctoral research. A quantitative survey was performed to assess the enabling characteristics of the HRD system. In addition, eighteen semi-structured in depth interviews with selected experts were carried out to clarify and follow up on different outstanding issues and details of the HRD system in selected central and local government institutions.

The article is organized into four main sections. The first section briefly reviews the relevant literature and conceptual framework focusing on describing the strategic context for devolving human resource responsibilities to line managers. The second section explores risks and benefits associated with greater involvement of line managers in HRD. In the third section the main findings related to the role and responsibilities of line managers in Lithuanian government institutions are reported and the implications for practice and research are discussed. Finally, conclusions and recommendations are provided.

Changing role of line manager in the context of strategic HRD

There are two distinctive features of the contemporary HRD approach - the devolution of HRD practices to line managers and the integration of HRD

with business strategy, or the emergence of Strategic Human Resource Development (SHRD).

The concept of SHRD has been explored by several authors in recent years [3; 6; 11 - 13]. It has been acknowledged that SHRD is a prerequisite for a learning culture to emerge and for a learning organization to develop [3]. Thus, a key focus of SHRD is the establishment of strong linkages with the strategic goals of organization and the creation of a learning environment and structural design, which promotes learning to improve performance [3; 6; 7; 13]. SHRD involves the integration of HRD with business objectives and this approach can be recognized through the presence of enabling characteristics, which are crucial to facilitate the emergence of SHRD. The devolution of HRD policies and practices to line managers is one of the key enabling characteristics of the SHRD system [3; 6; 13]. The fundamental assumption is that line managers can drive HRD policies and practices, which are designed to achieve the organization's strategic objectives through identifying, developing and supporting the appropriate knowledge, skills, commitment, and performance in employees [10].

The emergence of SHRD has significantly influenced the relationship between work and HRD activities. In the past HRD used to be primarily associated with training activities, now it is becoming predominately linked with learning from experience and self directed learning. It is extended to facilitating and supporting the learning processes within organizations and teams. Learning is no longer considered as a classroom activity required to develop specific skills or knowledge to enable employees to carry out specific functions, instead learning is necessary to cope with the changing demands of the organizational environment [5; 14]. The processes of learning and working are becoming very much intertwined and on the job learning is stimulated as much as possible. Informal learning is also considered as very important learning activity. This means that traditional training activities are no longer HRD's main product.

This changing view of learning in the context of SHRD has far-reaching implications for line managers who are expected to manage the workspace as a place to fit learning.

Since HRD activities are increasingly devolved to operational managers the actual training and development activities are being carried out by line management and employees, while HRD specialists monitor the quality and provide assistance and advice [3; 6; 15]. Based on Nonaka and Takeuchi [16] knowledge is created by line managers at the intersection of the vertical and horizontal flows of infor-

mation within the organization and line managers should be able to identify the knowledge gaps and communication problems. Furthermore, line managers are a key link in the learning process within organizations, and a channel through which the knowledge is transferred [19]. It is suggested that line managers are in a very powerful position to block or support implementation of HRD strategies and activities [21]. A line manager's influence does not come from any hierarchical authority, but from "a unique knowledge base, and their ability to integrate both strategic and operating level information" [9, p.1328]. Line managers balance the demands of senior management and employees and are both the suppliers of information to senior managers, and the implementers of the decisions taken by senior managers [10]. They are in a position of responsibility without authority to influence senior management decision making.

Implications of greater line manager involvement in HRD

The perception prevails that a number of benefits exist in using line managers as developers of people [3; 4; 6; 17; 24]. The following key arguments for devolution of HRD to line managers are provided by different scholars: allowing HRD decisions to be tailored to the real needs and circumstances at the operational level; improving employee relationships and the work environment; enabling more effective decision making because of the shorter lines of communication, and others. The main advantages presented in the scientific literature are summarized and discussed below.

Firstly, a line manager's role is critical in creating and stimulating the appropriate work environment supportive for learning [4; 10; 17]. It requires the promotion of positive attitudes towards continuous learning, since learning is not something that happens only during formal classroom training activities, but it is an integral facet of everyday working life. A line manager is expected to encourage the individual or team to take responsibility for how they will manage their own learning processes. It should happen through the provision of various opportunities for learning, for instance organizing meetings between employees with similar experience, creating mentor and job rotation systems, coaching, and others.

Secondly, the research confirms that usually line managers lack knowledge and competence in human resource management [3 – 5; 10]. Therefore, greater line managers' involvement in HRD activities may lead to a development and transformation of the managers themselves and they would become more com-

petent in managing people. This can also positively contribute to broader organizational change.

Thirdly, line managers can help to improve the quality of HRD interventions by closing the gap between organizational performance and individual performance [4; 10]. Line managers, rather than HRD specialists, are very familiar with the business context and both organizational and individual learning needs; therefore they should be able to address the most pressing learning needs. They are closer to the daily operations and customers. This gives line managers unique knowledge concerning organizational realities and needs, which can inform their understanding of the important issues and possible knowledge gaps. Without a systematic training needs analysis linked to the performance appraisal process it is unlikely that HRD will make a meaningful strategic contribution to enhancing organizational effectiveness. Identifying training needs arising from strategic goals, new technology and changes in the work process and linking it with performance appraisal process then becomes critical at the operational level for which a line manager is responsible.

Despite the arguments provided above, recent research has shown that delegating HRD responsibility carries a number of challenges and risks and line management involvement in HRD work is not without complications [4; 22]. Research provides mixed results about the implications of devolution and the competence of line managers in HRD work more generally [18].

It has been confirmed that workloads of line managers may marginalize their efforts in developing employees and they may not be able to pay sufficient attention to employee development. Performance criteria and reward systems are more likely to consider business results, than a longer term people development role [20]. The responsibility for HRD is not very often included among line manager's performance objectives. Also, it might be difficult for line managers to play two opposing roles of assessor and coach.

Moreover, line managers are not specialists in HRD and may lack confidence, knowledge and organizational support to assume the responsibility for HRD. Senior managers must be highly supportive in HRD role of line managers and an incentive system should be developed to motivate them [21]. Furthermore, acting as a HRD facilitator demands a coaching management style, as opposed to a directive management style. Lack of coaching skills and insufficient line management motivation for this role is reinforced by findings that the least popular HRD delivery mechanisms include coach-

ing and mentoring. This may be due to the large commitment of time and resources needed, yet these methods have consistently been emphasized as critical contribution to SHRD [23].

It is important to emphasize here that the involvement of HRD activities to the line does not mean that traditional HRD function should vanish or be abolished. It is about increasing the role of line managers in HRD, but not about taking over the HRD function from the specialists. There is little reason to believe that line managers can be better developers than specialists' trained in HRD [4]. The role of HRD specialists is also changing. HRD specialists are liberated from routine administration and can focus on strategic and change management issues. They should be recognized as HRD advisors instead of merely HRD providers. This calls for a partnership between line management and HRD specialists. HRD specialists should be able to offer regular support to line managers helping them to analyze performance problems, assess learning needs, develop individual learning plans and develop their own coaching skills [3; 12; 13].

However, the key question is what is expected of line managers in relation to HRD? Based on the scientific literature analysis five main roles of line managers in HRD have been distinguished [3; 4; 6; 24]:

- (1) Line managers should discuss periodically the performance and the development and learning needs of their subordinates;
- (2) Line managers should partner with HRD training specialists on strategic HRD/HRM issues;
- (3) Line managers should show interest and support learning of their subordinates on a daily bases;
- (4) Line managers should train and coach their subordinates;
- (5) Line managers should actively participate in HRD strategy development process.

Line manager's role in the government institutions of Lithuania

As mentioned in the introductory part, in order to discuss the HRD role of line managers in government institutions of Lithuania, the results of doctoral research were utilized to explore the situation. Several relevant questions were included in the survey questionnaire and consequently analyzed in more detail during the semi-structured interviews with selected experts.

In order to clarify the level of cooperation between HRD specialists and line managers the survey

asked where the primary responsibility between the HRD/training specialist and line management lies for decisions in a number of HRM/HRD areas (identification of the training needs, development of training plans, organization of training, discussion about the training needs, performance appraisal, career development and organization of training). Predictably the great majority of respondents say that responsibility on most issues is shared, apart from performance appraisal, discussions on career development and organizing of training. Based on the survey results, HRD specialists in Lithuanian government institutions have primary responsibility for the organization of training and line managers assume full responsibility for performance appraisal and the career development of their subordinates.

A majority of the respondents were not supportive of the statements that "line managers provide advice and consult their subordinates on HRD issues" and they did not agree with the statement "that line managers support the learning and development of their team members".

Interviewees were a bit more positive about the involvement of line managers in HRD. Expert interviews revealed that line managers are supportive of HRD activities in general (releasing civil servants to go to training, participating in the development of a training plan), however the level of involvement is insufficient. Twelve interviewees out of eighteen said that there is a lack of line manager's involvement in HRD and there is insufficient partnership and cooperation between line managers and HRD specialists, especially on strategic HRD issues. The interviews have confirmed that HRD specialists usually a not involved into the performance or career related discussions and line managers receive very little support in identifying learning and development needs of their subordinates. Furthermore, interviewees were asked to identify the main reasons inhibiting greater line manager's involvement in HRD. The main reasons mentioned during the interviews were: insufficient knowledge on HRD issues and a lack of time devoted to HRD on the side of line management, since line managers are focused on other operational priorities. On the side of HRD specialists it is also the lack of time, limited human resources and in some cases insufficient competency of HRD specialists to partner with and to consult line management. Some interviewees mentioned an overall lack of understanding and appreciation of the importance of the HRD function and quite a narrow understanding of HRD in general. Only six interviewees stated that responsibility for development of their subordinates forms a part of line manager's performance objec-

tives in their organization. Also, it was mentioned that there is little tradition of asking HRD specialists for advice and consultation in the area of training or personnel management, because the personnel management function used to be very technical in the past, mainly concerned with control, firing and hiring/firing. Importantly, a majority of the interviewees emphasized the need to develop the qualifications of line managers in the area of HRM and HRD.

Based on the survey results, it can be stated that line managers in Lithuanian government institutions perform a very limited role in HRD and have not assumed the developer responsibility of their subordinates yet. On the other hand, there was little evidence to suggest that HRD specialists had developed expanded roles as advisors and consultants. An overwhelming majority of the respondents and experts interviewed see HRD specialists in a more reactive role of training organizer [7]. The five roles indicated in the second section, as a result of literature review, are not yet carried out by line managers or carried out only to a very limited extent.

Conclusions

1. We can conclude that greater management involvement in HRD reflects a significant transformation of management development in organizations. However, before displacing traditional HRD development systems and roles substantial investments in capacity development of the line managers and HRD specialists as well of other stakeholders are needed to make sure that line managers and HRD specialists are capable of carrying out their new roles.

2. The following roles of line managers in HRD have been distinguished based on the scientific literature analysis: (1) Line managers should discuss periodically the performance and the development and learning needs of their subordinates; (2) Line managers should partner with HRD training specialists on strategic HRD/HRM issues; (3) Line managers should show interest and support learning of their subordinates on a daily bases; (4) Line managers should train and coach their subordinates; (5) Line managers should actively participate in HRD strategy development process.

3. It can be concluded that in government institutions of Lithuania line managers have not assumed the responsibility for HRD. It was confirmed that it is difficult to fulfill this role, either because of their work load or lack of skills and management tradition in this area. Cooperation between line management and HRD/training exist, however a lack of line managers' involvement in HRD as well as limited capacities of HRD special-

ist to support and consult the line managers, indicates that the partnerships suggested by many scholars does not exist in central and local government institutions of Lithuania.

4. For line managers in Lithuanian government institutions to perform the HRD roles distinguished in the second section, several strategies can be deployed. Firstly, it is necessary to clarify what exactly is expected of line managers with regard to HRD, and what remains/becomes the role of HRD professionals. Some seem to expect the HRD function to disappear, as learning issues are more and more integrated with general management, while others appear to see a different role for HRD professionals as organizational change consultants. Secondly, since line managers usually are not specialists in HRD, they should be periodically screened with respect to their performance and their learning needs, both in the area of their specialty and in the area of HR development. Thus, it is important to increase their skills and knowledge in HRD and therefore it is necessary to consider incorporating HRD skills training in all training packages for managers. Capacities of HRD specialists to provide advice and consultancy services to the line should be also developed. Thirdly, line managers should be given more ownership of HRD strategies by allowing them more involvement in decision making at the policy formulation level and developing a more strategic partnership between HRD specialists and senior managers. In this way, they would develop a better understanding of the broader perspective. Finally, supporting their staff in learning should become part of a line manager's performance objectives.

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Vidurinio lygmens vadovų dalyvavimas žmogiškųjų išteklių vystymo procesuose

Reziumė

Straipsnyje aptariama šiuolaikinė tendencija nukreipti žmogiškųjų išteklių vystymo (ŽIV) funkciją vidurinio lygmens vadovams. Siekiama nustatyti ir įvertinti šių pokyčių reikšmę bei įtaką ŽIV. Taip pat analizuojamas vidurinio lygmens vadovų vaidmuo vystant žmogiškuosius išteklius Lietuvos valdžios institucijose. Remiantis atlikta analize nustatyta, jog šiuo metu vidurinio lygmens vadovai Lietuvos valdžios institucijose nepriima atsakomybės už savo pavaldinių ugdymą. Pagrindiniai veiksniai, turintys įtakos šiai situacijai yra didelis darbo krūvis, nepakankamas dėmesys šiam veiklos prioritetui valdžios institucijose, reikalingų žinių ir gebėjimų ŽIV srityje stoka, taip pat atitinkamų tradicijų bei palaikančios organizacinės kultūros stoka. Šiai situacijai didelės įtakos turi ir poreikis keisti ŽIV specialistų veiklos pobūdį: pereiti nuo mokymų organizatoriaus vaidmens prie patarėjo-konsultanto, gebančio patarti ir padėti tarpiniams vadovams atlikti darbuotojų veiklos vertinimą, nustatyti mokymosi poreikius ir planuoti karjerą.