



Introduction

Human resource development in the Asia Pacific: coverage, themes and contents

1. Introduction

As we approach the mid-point of the first decade of the 21st century the area of human resource development (HRD) – training and development (T&D) – has become ever more important to businesses and policy makers. This is especially the case in Asia as two of its largest economies (Japan, South Korea), have few other natural resources. Companies in these countries face a range of pressures and ways to compete with profound implications for HRD. The use of human resources (HR) and HR management (HRM) systems, albeit they are varied, are an integral part of this area of HRD. These have implications for not only governments and policy makers, but also management and individuals.

2. Coverage, themes and contents

2.1. Coverage

The five papers cover a range of Asia Pacific economies and countries. These include 'The Big Three' of the People's Republic of China (China for shorthand from now on), Japan and South Korea (Korea for shorthand from now on) as well as Hong Kong and Taiwan. While obviously not comprehensive of the Asia Pacific region, they do encompass the largest economic and population centres. They also represent a temporal range of 'economic super-

powers'—'older' (Japan), 'recent' (Korea) and 'emerging' (China).

Four of the papers are based on empirical studies to varying extents. These include a survey of CEOs (160) and HR Executives (189) (Selmer & Chiu), interview questionnaires of enterprises (6) of varied size, ownership and sectors (Zhu), a questionnaire survey (344) of firms (Bae & Rowley), and a questionnaire of employees (1560) who had participated in T&D programs (Lee & Hsin).

2.2. Themes

A range of HRD themes is covered in these articles. These include the role of a particular type of educational T&D – the Master of Business Administration (MBA) (China); the competencies of HR practitioners (Hong Kong); the development of T&D policies by the state and firms (Japan); the formulation of an inclusive HRD framework of the three – government, organizations, individuals – 'social actors' (Korea), and finally the use of T&D programs and their impacts on human capital and employment (Taiwan).

These themes can be seen within a triple helix of issues. First, the varied ways for businesses to compete and gain a sustainable competitive advantage. This can be roughly divided as lower quality, simple production, not needing high skills and reliant on low wages costs versus high quality, sophisticated, value-added production requiring high skills and reducing the importance of wage costs. This strategic choice is

happening in a time-compressed fashion in Asia as China cannibalizes investment and manufacturing capacity from around the world and nearby countries. One example is Korea that is facing the 'hollowing-out' of its traditional manufacturing capacity based on low wage costs. The ways to try to address and tackle this dilemma for Korean firms is through the role of HRD. Given this general situation, there is a choice between a market-based, laissez-faire governmental approach, leaving it up to organizations to adopt strategies, versus various levels of governmental encouragement. This has implications for a third issue, the role of three groups involved in HRD - states, organizations and individuals. Their interactions vary over time and stage of economic development.

2.3. Contents

The first article, 'HRD in the People's Republic: The MBA 'with Chinese Characteristics?' is by Goodall et al. The authors consider HRD and analyze the value of an MBA in a transitional economy. MBA education is expanding in China while elsewhere, such as the US, it faces declining enrollments and criticisms. To answer their questions—"Should the MBA be valued differently in a developing economy, or is it open to the same criticisms leveled at it in the West?", the authors use the 'resource-based' theory of the firm. The authors are interested in if the government adopted similar approaches to fostering MBA provision as it did to nurturing business growth and what might be learned about future trends in business education. The development of MBA education in China from 1984 is outlined in the context of the country's radical educational, economic and political changes and one of the earliest programs—the European Union-funded China Europe International Business School.

The second article, 'Required HR Competencies in the Future: A Framework for Developing HR Executives in Hong Kong' is by Selmer & Chiu. It is commonly argued that HRM has emerged as a critical factor in creating a competitive edge for businesses. HR managers should be business partners who play the role of what the authors call 'diagnostician' and 'strategist' in organizations. Hong Kong HR practitioners, however, are poorly equipped to play such a part since professional HRM training

has largely neglected strategic aspects. The views of CEOs and HR Executives regarding the level of competencies of future HR leaders are contrasted and provide a basis for a framework guiding the direction and content of the future development of HR practitioners.

The third article, 'Responding to the Challenges of Globalization: HRD in Japan' is by Zhu. This contribution illustrates the changes in HRD in response to globalization. The author notes that globalization speeds up the competition for HRs among nations. In Asia, increasing pressure on developing HRs for better economic performance led governments to implement more T&D policies. In addition, enterprises have also been encouraged to do so in order to improve competitiveness. Japan has increased spending on T&D and other HRD activities. Economic stagnation forced both government and enterprises to develop new policies to upgrade skills and reduce the mismatch between jobs and skills.

The fourth article, 'Macro and Micro Approaches in HRD: Context and Content in Korea' is by Bae & Rowley. They examine HRD at various levels and in different dimensions to develop a framework to locate the context and outcomes of HRD. The authors analyze the importance of HRs and HRD, providing macro and micro empirical evidence. They also develop hypotheses regarding the relationship of spending on T&D. This involves both organizational (e.g. product differentiation, learning culture) and HR (e.g. employee empowerment, long-term worker attachment to companies) aspects. The implications for business and management of developments in each of these areas are set out.

The fifth article, 'Employee Training and Human Capital in Taiwan' is by Lee & Hsin. They argue that globalization and the development of the network economy have enhanced the competitiveness of the economy and citizens benefited from lower product prices. The downside unfortunately has been both unemployment and employment instability. Government attempts to tackle this and improve human capital in the HRD process give rise to questions as to whether T&D programs can really (1) provide the workforce with sustainable employability and effectively reduce the probability of unemployment; (2) help shorten unemployment periods, thus reducing the overall number of the structurally-

unemployed; (3) ultimately lead to increases in overall income levels for successful trainees.

3. Conclusions

There is a common rhetoric of business leaders that “our people are our greatest asset”. Yet, copious work indicates the opposite of this in reality. One indicator of this is HRD, which remains high on the agenda for many government and policy makers, as well as businesses, yet is often neglected and the first area to be cut when savings are being looked for. Within organizations there may be a problem as HR managers need to operate, as Selmer & Chiu remind us, at three levels – strategic (organizational), tactical (managerial), and functional (operational), yet remain embedded in the last level. This does little to ‘protect’ HRD in eras of belt tightening.

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