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A potential of strategic HR development on individual levels of creativity

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Summary

By responding to recent calls to incorporate a more sustainable and focused view on the developmental aspects of creativity, this paper examines a problem of human creativity at work within the realm of strategic Human Resource Development (HRD) literature. It incorporates a narrower focus on a facilitation HRD perspective and the opportunities it can bring to unleash and develop the untapped creative expertise. The paper adopts a mixed method research design, demonstrating a more inclusive approach to the challenge of human creativity at work. By encouraging participants to complete an online multifaceted assessment tool and engage in creative HRD workshops, the study aims to investigate changes in individual creative behaviour. The preliminary findings indicate a relationship between HRD and individual levels of creativity, suggesting that HRD interventions can be used to initiate creativity-related cognitive processes and more creative behaviours.

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Background

Shalley et al. (2004) define creativity as “a function of the employee’s personal characteristics, the characteristics of the context in which he or she works, and also the interaction among these characteristics”. The essence of personal characteristics is explained by hard-core personality traits and surface self-concept characteristics (Karwowski and Lebuda, 2015). The above view on creativity underlies the role of the person-context relationship helping to achieve higher levels of creativity (Woodman et al., 1993; Amabile and Pratt, 2016). This means that creativity is the result of individual, behavioural, cognitive and contextual factors (e.g. the working environment) (Woodman et al., 1993; Da Costa et al., 2015; Amabile and Pratt, 2016). They determine the nature of individual creative behaviour and the quality of creative output (Sung et al., 2018; Kim, 2019). The definition also highlights the wide distribution of creative potential in organisations suggesting that employees across all roles and functions can be creative with the capacity to develop something new (Aasen et al., 2012).

Observations made by contemporary creativity researchers indicate that the creative idea generation process is not straightforward (Furnham, 2018) and can be influenced by psychological or behavioural barriers (Hon and Lui, 2016). For instance, some individuals may actively use their potential and behave creatively at work, while others may find it hard to demonstrate creativity, despite their inherent creative potential. This may be explained by low self-reported views on individual creativity and reduced involvement in creative problem solving (Hon and Lui, 2016). In addition, an inhibiting working environment and lack of appropriate training and development may reinforce negative attitudes to creative performance at work (Gevers and Demerouti, 2013; Somsing and Belbaly, 2017). The evidence in this regard however remains fragmented due to measurement concerns, i.e. a lack of a reliable, valid and multidimensional tool to measure creativity (Furnham, 2018).

Hon and Lui (2016) and Martin and Wilson (2017) call for a thorough examination of creativity enhancing strategies and their potential to reduce negative effects of less creative behaviours at work. The scant research referring to creativity-related developmental practices suggest that Human Resource Development (HRD) strategies are well placed to effectively stimulate individual creative effort. However, creativity research in the field of HRD remains underdeveloped (Latukha, 2018; Meinel *et al.*, 2018) and a reliable evidence-base indicating and explaining how creativity occurs and the impact of same is not yet provided (Furnham, 2018). To address the problem, this paper investigates the problem of human creativity at work within the realm of HRD, specifically focusing on the role of HRD interventions and the opportunities they can bring to develop and unleash untapped human expertise (Gilley et al., 2011). Consequently the following research question is posed:

Research question: What is the link between HRD and individual levels of creativity?

Literature review

Creativity within HRD research

Creativity is a core topic in the strategic HRD literature (SHRD) (Coelho et al., 2016; Gomes et al., 2016). SHRD can be understood as “a distinctive approach to employment management which seeks to achieve competitive advantage through strategic development of highly committed and capable workforce, using an integrated array of cultural, structural and personnel techniques” (Storey, 1995, p. 5; in Rees and French, 2016). Joo et al. (2013) add that “SHRD can play a pivotal role in enhancing employee creativity and in building a more appropriate contextual environment for creativity by providing employees with learning and development opportunities and by changing the organisational culture and practices” (p. 392; cited in Gomes et al., 2016).

A link between creativity and SHRD is found in various practices. In previous studies, they have largely been investigated as part of a bundle of Human Resource Management (HRM) practices on creativity and innovation with evidence indicating a strong correlation between such practices and organisational/business unit performance (Guthrie et al., 2009; Heffernan et al., 2016; Jaiswal and Dhar, 2017; He et al., 2018). The direct influence of HRD practices on employee creativity is less clear (Jiang et al., 2012; Binyamin and Carmeli, 2017). Connections between SHRD and employee creativity are summarised in Table 1.

HRD Perspective	HRD practice	Creativity
Facilitation	Experiential learning, training and development	Coaching, mentoring, small group work
Play	Organic and natural forms	Game play, user engagement, decision making
Community and dialog	Social construction, making sense in creative communities	Open spaces, knowledge and ideas exchange, group work

Table 1 – Strategic HRD practices in relation to individual creativity (Gibb and Waight, 2005)

This paper focuses on a facilitation HRD perspective as an enabler of individual creativity. Joo et al. (2013) suggest that HRD practices associated with learning, training and development are well-placed to promote a sense of creative personality and a more supportive organisational environment. Affecting and developing creativity-related capacities is not easy (Joo et al., 2014; Veenendaal and Bondarouk, 2015; Latukha, 2018), therefore, research incorporating the concept of creative personality within broader HRD research still represents a research gap.

The potential of HRD on individual creativity

The concept of HRD is closely connected with the areas of skill acquisition, self-actualisation, and modernisation (McGuire and Jorgensen, 2010). HRD practices can be viewed as planned interventions, short training programmes, or on-site activities. For instance, they can develop creative abilities, encourage creative behaviours and creative problem solving (Loewenberger, 2013). They can also create a supportive climate for creativity by enhancing commitment to creative endeavours, contributing to the shared understanding of the strategic role and value of creativity, and diminishing organisational and social barriers at work (Amabile et al., 1996; McGuire and Jorgensen, 2010; Jiang et al., 2012; Heffernan et al., 2016).

HRD can stimulate, encourage and sustain creativity by effecting each of the three major components of creativity namely domain-relevant skills, creativity-relevant skills, and motivation (Amabile, 2017). HRD interventions enable personal and cognitive characteristics that are central for creative problem solving (Joo et al., 2013) and likely to benefit firm performance. Investment in the development of individual creative potential results in future returns on investment in the form of staff retention and increased competitive advantage. By creating and maintaining the employee-centred organisational culture, organisations also become better prepared for disruptions in the event of loss of employees and can guarantee survival in the long-term.

However, current understanding of how to achieve a sustainable interaction between HRD and individual levels of creativity is inadequate. For example, it is unclear how to engage

employees in developmental creative activities that may influence sustainable long-term effects of HRD intervention (Walker and Fox, 2012; Joo et al., 2014).

Methods

The mixed method, fully sequential dominant status research design is used in the paper. Such design involves mixing qualitative and quantitative approaches within different stages of the research process, such as data collection, data analysis and data interpretation stages. Specifically, qualitative and quantitative phases occur sequentially in research, with a greater emphasis placed on the qualitative stage (Onwuegbuzie et al., 2007; Saunders et al., 2016).

Pilot study

A pilot study has been undertaken to examine validity and reliability of qualitative and quantitative research methods employed. The qualitative data was collected during a creativity intervention, delivered as part of an Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) sponsored event, comprising of 9 participants. The purpose of the intervention was to investigate the qualitative approach on a smaller sample of participants. During the event, the creative technique ‘Circle of Opportunity’ was utilised to initiate and encourage creative thinking processes (Michalko, 2006). Within the qualitative data collection stage, discourse analysis of naturally occurring conversation with participants of the workshop was undertaken. In addition, observations of behaviours and within-group conversations, as well as interactions with event participants after the intervention, were recorded. Precise attention was awarded to both verbal and non-verbal language, the former was considered the medium for interaction, the latter as an indicator of what people actually did and how well they performed (Stanley et al., 2016). Discourse analysis allowed for structural organisations of meanings (Cameron, 2009): the words and behaviours were translated into themes, the codes were abbreviated and analysed using NVivo 12.2.

The results of qualitative analysis informed the construction of a multifaceted quantitative research tool, designed to further investigate the research problem (Onwuegbuzie et al., 2007). Using evidence from previous research, the frequently used themes, i.e. originality (So and Joo, 2017), fluency (Meinel et al, 2018), and elaboration (Dong et al, 2017) were explored in the context of hard-core personality traits and surface self-concept characteristics. The context considering working environment was added, to gain a deeper insight of individual creative thinking at work and increase criterion-related validity and reliability of the quantitative instrument.

A link to the online version of the instrument was sent to intervention participants, as well as professionals and MSc students. Participation was voluntary, and responses were used for feedback purposes only. The sample equalled 60 participants, and included 21 professionals, 9 event participants, and 30 Master of Science (MSc) students from Ulster University. Of the 60 participants, 23 respondents (38%) returned the forms: 18 professionals, 2 event participants and 3 MSc students.

Measures

The quantitative instrument consists of three underlying constructs: hard-core personality traits, creative self-concept characteristics, and perceptions of the work environment. Hard-core personality traits are measured using the NEO Five-Factor Inventory by Costa and McCrae (1992) but adapted to this research by incorporating job-related context. Self-concept characteristics are measured using a 5-item scale, which includes items from previous research by Tierney and Farmer (2002) and Zhang and Bartol (2010). The role of the working environment on human creativity is measured using the KEYS[®] to Creativity and Innovation

instrument (Amabile et al., 1996). Only specific items from each of the dimensions of the instrument are selected and included in the self-assessment tool, those selected are determined based on relevance.

Preliminary results and discussion

The results of discourse analysis identified a range of key creativity-related constructs emerged as a result of HRD intervention. Specifically, “originality”, “elaboration of new ideas”, and “fluency” have been observed. In previous research, they have been referred to as higher-level executive abilities and predictors of creativity-related processes (Byrge and Tang, 2015; Morin et al., 2018). This finding indicates a relationship between strategic HRD and individual levels of creativity, where HRD interventions can be used to initiate creativity-related cognitive processes and behaviours.

Cronbach’s alpha examined reliability of the quantitative instrument. In addition, the Pearson product-moment correlation identified the strength of relationships between the variables. The results of reliability analysis showed moderate to very good internal consistency, ranging from .52 (Extraversion in the work related context) to .89 (preselected constructs from the KEYS® to Creativity and Innovation instrument). Some constructs (e.g. Agreeableness in the work-related context) were eliminated from the instrument and subsequent analyses as they did not pass reliability testing. The results of correlation analysis demonstrated a very strong positive association of several personality constructs with individual creative self-concept characteristics (Openness to experience in the job-related context ($r = .66, p < .001$), Extraversion in the job-related context ($r = .55, p < .001$). This finding is in line with research on personality traits and creativity (Furnham and Bachtiar, 2008; Karwowski et al., 2016). However, it extends previous work by addressing the link between hard-core personality traits and creative self-concept characteristics in the organisational context, i.e. the context in which creativity is developed. The results of validity analysis are not discussed in the paper due to limitations of the sample size, the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) Index of sampling adequacy value was below the minimum value of .6. A bigger sample size is required to perform the analysis (forthcoming).

Further work

The next steps will involve confirmation of validity and reliability of the quantitative instrument using a larger sample of respondents. In addition, it will be correlated with several demographic characteristics to understand the nature of the relationship within the constructs.

After the pilot study, the on-site research will occur. By delivering a series of HRD workshops in hotel groups across Northern Ireland, this research will identify qualitative and quantitative changes in creative behaviours pre- and post the interventions periods.

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