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COVID-19 and OD: Unplanned Disruption and the Opportunity for Planned Talent Development

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“Talent Development (TD) and Organization Development (OD) approaches can be used concurrently by employers to improve performance, strengthen culture, and achieve a measurable competitive advantage in the future world of work.”

COVID-19 and OD

Unplanned Disruption and the Opportunity for Planned Talent Development

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Abstract

COVID-19 created an unprecedented global health crisis and caused a rapid, global economic meltdown. Organizations of all sizes are scrambling to salvage workforces and adopting policies to protect employees from the virus. Talent development practices face new challenges as the world reckons with our altered COVID-19 pandemic reality. Organization leaders must think creatively to design the employment practices of the future. In this article, we consider how changes in work environments affect employees and organization performance, examine how recruitment, training, onboarding, and developing talent present complex challenges that must be addressed for sustainability, and consider how talent development principles can enhance OD practices. Finally, we offer perspectives on employing OD principles and practices to facilitate workforce changes to maximize productivity and performance.

Keywords: Talent Development, OD Practices, COVID-19
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The COVID-19 global health pandemic of 2020 is likely to alter the world of work significantly. To slow the spread, federal, state, and local governments issued guidelines and regulations for individuals to shelter-in-place, which resulted in the closure of many businesses deemed “non-essential”. Facing the lost revenue from this shutdown, many organizations furloughed employees indefinitely in hopes of bringing them back when the economy rebounded. Other organizations opted to close and laid off employees in response to the shutdown. Those that could sent employees home to work.

The rapid response to the pandemic across the world continues to have economic ripple effects. Nations worldwide have been affected as the service and manufacturing sectors saw precipitous declines in revenue and job losses, declines that are

likely to have long-term ramifications on the global economy (World Bank, 2020). Organizations have largely responded well to maintain workforces where possible and by adopting policies to protect employees from contamination in the office environment. However, implications for talent development in what might be a permanent remote-centered working environment are as yet unexplored.

In this article, we examine how talent development perspectives may change with an increasing number of employees working from home due to ongoing quarantine initiatives. We consider how the office environment may change and the impact such changes may have on recruitment, training, onboarding, and developing talent, all of which present complex challenges during and after a global pandemic. Finally, we explore how talent development processes

may need to change and how OD principles might be used to meet the increasingly remote-centered factors in the new world of work.

A Global Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic brought significant changes to how we work and live. As the novel coronavirus spread, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control (CDC) recommended isolation until further epidemiologic studies were conducted and communicated to the general public (Centers for Disease Control, 2020). In large part, individuals complied, and organizations, wherever possible, implemented work-from-home initiatives to comply with state and local mandates to shelter-in-place.

Despite a slight reprieve from the virus over the summer of 2020, fall and winter resurgence showed infection rates and deaths climbing across the world (The New York Times, 2020). Although vaccine immunizations began in January 2021, distribution challenges plague the rollout, and troubling mutations of the virus have begun to appear (The New York Times, 2021). Thus, an accurate estimation of when we might return to pre-pandemic conditions seems elusive. In light of these uncertainties, organizations worldwide continue to seek new ways to sustain business operations using remote workers both now and into the foreseeable future.

New Perspectives of Remote Working

COVID-19 changed virtually everything about the working environment for both employers and employees. Many organizations implemented procedures to enable employees with long-term remote working opportunities, with others likely to follow (Hadden et al., 2020). Early indications are the new work-from-home model might be a success, specifically for knowledge workers (Birkinshaw et al., 2020). Increased productivity, decreased employee commute times, reduced impromptu meetings, reduced carbon footprints, and a reduction in office expenses (Lawson & Scheid, 2020; Lewis, 2020) were among the early

indicators remote working might be a boon for both employees and organizations. Yet, there are challenges.

Employees wrestle with child- and elder-care issues and increased isolation. Individual exhaustion and burnout grow, and the initial gains in work-from-home workforce productivity seem to be eroding (Davis, 2020; Lawson & Scheid, 2020; Van Hoof, 2020). While employee challenges have been exacerbated by working remotely, they are not necessarily unique to work-from-home conditions. Employees face and are affected by these challenges even when working in the office environment, although they may not be visible to employers (Grensing-Pophal, 2020). Work-life and work-family conflict has been well-documented by scholars (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985; Kossek, 2016; Kossek & Lee, 2017), and the pandemic only highlights and intensifies these challenges. It may be that COVID-19 will lead to a heightened awareness of how personal issues affect individual employees and their workplace productivity.

The current working environment created in response to COVID-19 provides employers an opportunity to rethink employee talent development in a way that is employee-centered and location independent. Although some organizations are likely to return to a place-based working environment once deemed safe, other organizations may not. Regardless of in-person or virtual work environments, employers still face the challenge of acquiring, developing, and retaining the best employees. The effective use of collaborative virtual tools to recruit, train, and mentor employees is a key element for long-term success. However, it is equally important to strengthen organizational culture as it relates to employee engagement and development. Employees' experiences and perceptions of their workplaces reflect their mindset and beliefs about their organizations' cultural norms and behaviors, particularly related to how talent and ability are viewed (Canning et al., 2020). In this way, Talent Development (TD) and Organization Development (OD) approaches can be used concurrently by employers to improve performance, strengthen culture, and achieve

a measurable competitive advantage in the future world of work.

Differentiating Talent Development from Organization Development

As organizations look to gain a competitive advantage with a remote workforce, exploring how TD might be made more effective by incorporating OD principles is a good first step. To best understand how OD might play a role, it is essential to revisit OD, define the concept of TD, and harness the attributes of both to develop organizational talent. Some argue that the distinguishing characteristics for OD and TD are explained through the literature on values-based change (Church et al., 2018):

- » **Organization Development:** Focused on “the many,” organizational culture, change, and performance.
- » **Talent Development:** Focused on “the few” high-potentials and succession planning.

Church et al. (2018, p.271) propose that “OD is about the system as a social entity, and TD is about fine-tuning the machine that produces the best talent to run the organization.” Traditional OD techniques focus on the many; however, it is important to acknowledge the impact that TD, with its focus on the few, has in making a difference for the overall organization. An engaged and empowered workforce is one that will be poised to meet the challenges of the post-COVID-19 pandemic environments. Additionally, this new workforce must be developed through the use of collaborative technologies and continuous improvement techniques. Collaborative technologies enable real-time engagement and intervention and shorten the time between the steps in the improvement cycle, both of which are important factors in developing a remote workforce, strengthening both the individual and the collective.

An OD and TD Approach for Operational Resilience

In 2018, industry leaders warned organizations to reskill and upskill if they wanted

to stay relevant (The Council of Economic Advisers, 2018). Those companies who chose to ignore the warnings appear to have tripped, stumbled, or fallen when the pandemic hit (Cawood, 2020). Digitization has widened the skills gap; however, COVID-19 further highlighted the urgent need to quickly shift employees between different functions within an organization (upskill) or shift workers to move between functions more easily in an organization (reskill) or industry sector when disruptive factors stretch existing workforces of essential industries, e.g., healthcare or education (Allas et al., 2020; Enders et al., 2020). The gap between current skills and required skills is not insurmountable, but organizations must refocus and take steps to reskill and upskill talent. Operational resilience depends on having systems to support rapid skill development at all organizational levels (Sarma, 2020). From a corporate perspective, upskilling can increase productivity, reduce talent acquisition costs, boost employee morale, and improve retention (Allas et al., 2020). Reskilling creates mechanisms for improved collaboration across industry sectors where similar skills are required (Enders et al., 2020). Like upskilling, reskilling also improves the morale and retention of retrained workers while bridging the skill gaps in the marketplace with experienced employees eager to learn new skills.

Given that OD's value is building capacity to increase effectiveness, and TD's central focus is the purposeful development of human resources, successfully implementing reskilling and upskilling initiatives should strengthen individual and organizational performance, resulting in improved operational resilience. This combination of OD and TD can ensure individuals and organizations are primed for success. Low skill attainment has profound and far-reaching consequences; the global economy depends on the ability to upskill and reskill. As life expectancies increase and people stay in the workforce longer, continuing education and training will be essential to economic survival and the ability to compete (Holoubek & Hibbard, 2020). Thus, the focus on the

many and the few (Church et al., 2018) must be a strategic choice for organizations to continue to survive and thrive in an unknown future.

Schön (1973) suggested a stable state no longer exists, and all institutions are subject to continual transformation. Thus, it is essential to build “learning systems” whereby we might “understand, guide, influence and manage these transformations” to build capacity (Schön, 1973, p. 28). Senge (1990b) further argues organizations that encourage continual learning nurture “expansive patterns of thinking” and lean into “people’s commitment and capacity to learn” will be more responsive to changing demands of the marketplace and in a better position to achieve performance goals (pp. 3–4). Moreover, the five fundamental disciplines of learning organizations—systems thinking, personal mastery, mental models, shared vision, and team learning require leaders to be adept at building or refining culture. The challenge for many organizations is the mental models existing in organizational culture may not allow them to move from adaptive to generative learning, thereby limiting growth and performance (Senge, 1990a). This becomes all the more problematic in the current world of ‘virtual organizations’. While Senge’s (1990b) perspective on learning organizations is not new, it does provide a framework for achieving differentiation. Operationalizing this framework involves both OD and TD elements so that talented employees grow and sustain the organization.

Suggestions for Reskilling and Upskilling:

Allas et al. (2020) suggest the following steps are a good starting point for reskilling and upskilling initiatives:

- » **Define critical reskill areas and identify training.** Think strategically; clarify long-term needs, then compare current skill levels.
- » **Use available data to map existing workforce skills.** Perform a skills audit, use capacity-based assessment tools to determine soft skills, like learning at a defined pace and other critical thinking skills, important for reskilling efforts.

- » **Focus on required skills, not roles or titles.** Jobs that seem quite distinct may have similar duties.
- » **Use mission-critical skill sets to drive personalized learning.** Reskilling ineffectiveness is due to poor up-front engagement and a lack of follow-up.
- » **Develop educational incentive programs.** Build a culture of lifelong learning by clarifying the link to career advancement.

Potential Upskill and Reskill Solutions

Education may no longer be linear with the endpoint of a diploma; it is a lifelong process—the responsibility for upskilling and reskilling impacts everyone in every organization. While there are no best, efficient, and most effective ways to upskill, reskill and move to a continuous learning organization, the following suggestions may help organizations adapt real-time (Holoubek & Hibbard, 2020).

Learning Management Systems (LMS) provide employers with a mechanism for the administration, documentation, tracking, reporting, and delivery of training and educational courses and learning development plans. Organizations could also consider purchasing digital equipment and producing video libraries, with appropriate leadership from within the organization delivering the training. Leaders who employees know and recognize build trust and relationships and may enhance learning. Organizational learning and the culture of learning are components of OD and effective ways to develop talent. An LMS can foster the idea of organizational learning in support of individual and organization improvement and success. It could also be argued that implementing an LMS could be viewed as an unnecessary expense resulting in additional work. Organizations that aim to retain key talent should examine the pros and cons of implementing such a system to determine whether an optimized system’s long-term benefits would prove beneficial.

Some education services are workforce accelerators that partner with universities at a regional level to identify employer challenges, translate them into skills, and

deliver intense training to students who graduate employee ready. Coding schools and boot camps are often part of these education services; these intense programs are efficient options for learning tech skills in a short time frame (Holoubek & Hibbard, 2020).

Increase Employee Coaching and Mentoring

The remote working environment can create a challenge for coaching and mentoring. With an onsite workforce, it is easier for coaches and mentors to help employees find their place in the company and improve work performance (Colletta, 2020). With a remote-working environment, the opportunity for drop-in coaching and hallway conversations is non-existent.

The act of coaching and mentoring must now be more deliberate. It is important to schedule regular video-based one-on-one meetings to provide business updates, open conversations about concerns and challenges, and offer specific coaching and mentoring sessions (Kelley, 2020). For individualized coaching and mentoring programs to produce competent leaders, organizations must promote and reward learning opportunities, especially for those at the beginning of their careers. In turn, the tech-savvy young employee can assist a more mature coach/mentor to understand and use new technologies (Deiorio et al., 2016). Such sessions are likely to improve employee satisfaction and performance, build and strengthen working relationships, and foster a learning organization culture.

Assessing the current workforce, reskilling/upskilling those in need, using an LMS program for training, recruiting to initially fill skill gaps, and employing targeted, learning-centric coaching can all enhance talent development, thus, strengthening the organizational system. In combination, these approaches should enable an organization to create a better-developed workforce in the era of COVID-19.

Strengthening the Whole: Applied OD in the Future Workforce

When faced with the challenges of the future work environment, corporate leaders can apply OD principles and practices to address the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and other future disruptive events. A potential approach can be taken by organizing a talent development project into three distinct phases, as proposed below:

Phase I: Organizational Analysis
(Short-term)

Phase II: Organizational Learning
(Mid-term)

Phase III: Organizational Coaching
(Long-term)

It is imperative that in Phase I, the necessary support is created to successfully initiate the project. This can be obtained by conducting an organizational analysis and engaging the organization's leadership team as sustainable change starts at the top. Nielson (1984) suggests that OD activity is shaped by the project terms initiated by organizational leadership and is tied to a specific set of goals achieved through a defined process. Specifically, the process is guided by the following :

- » Development & presentation of the objectives and who will be directly involved,
- » Individual interviews with a selected sample (i.e., a specified number of associates within an organization),
- » Data analysis and synthesized feedback, and;
- » An all-day problem-solving session with the top management group.

Surveys could be conducted virtually to seek both quantitative and qualitative responses. These data would allow top management to understand employees' problems stemming from their current situation and the associated long-term needs. Moreover, by casting a wide net, the data quality increases, allowing an OD practitioner to identify and address primary issues related to talent development, thereby enabling a clear sense of the initiative's scope.

Phase II of the activity would focus on organizational learning. Support for a top-down initiative to encourage employees to develop personal visions could provide insights for direct supervisors, the organization, and, most importantly, individual employees. Boyatzis et al. (2019) argue a personal vision is shaped by an individual's perspective of their ideal and future self. This vision also shapes their individual perspective on personal and professional development. One approach for developing and tracking personal visions could be using an LMS, further enhancing upskilling and reskilling. An ideal LMS can help manage personal development, performance goals, and company goals. It can assist in aligning employees' developmental goals with those of the organization. This information can be combined and crafted into career development goals, a critical step to engage associates in their organizational growth plans. Leaders should "champion" the LMS use as it could be key in engaging talent throughout the organization as a mid-term objective, continuing to promote a culture of learning.

Finally, Phase III of the talent development project would focus on organizational coaching. By benchmarking employees' capability, key talent is identified by setting defined areas for improvement related to an individual's growth and the organization's needs. Cultivating positive and constructive leadership behaviors, on the other hand, can be much more complicated. Boyatzis et al. (2019) suggest coaching with compassion can facilitate the desired change within an individual that shapes an organization's culture, and they propose a four-stage process to coach individuals in combination with performance goals:

- » Identification of ideal self through personal vision;
- » Understanding real self (i.e., strengths, opportunities for improvement);
- » Development of a learning agenda, and;
- » Experimenting or practicing new behaviors through the support of other individuals.

Additionally, the authors indicate this process can provide management

with key indicators of talent throughout the organization.

In addition to achieving technical and company-related goals, coaching associates to achieve personal development goals produces a long-term positive effect on morale. This delivers a more natural approach to succession planning and allows the company to cultivate systemic learning, engender an environment of talent development, and enable sustainable change in employees throughout the organization

Discussion

The global workforce and economy were not adequately prepared for the impact of COVID-19. Although some organizations had implemented flexible work environments before COVID-19, many had not transitioned to remote-working. The pandemic's disruptive nature demonstrated it is not necessarily where employees work but how employees work. The pandemic highlighted the challenges of developing the talent of a remote workforce and raised questions about how to implement a differentiating TD framework for learning that is both organizationally sustainable and impactful. Considering these perspectives, we argue that leaders, managers, and professionals in both OD and TD will benefit from the following approaches as we continue to navigate our collective way through the pandemic and its eventual aftermath.

First, there must be a collective focus on the many and the few (Church et al., 2018) to ensure individual employees' systemic development and a sustainable future for the organization. An organization's most valuable resource is its workforce. A focus on developing talent at all levels of the organization to ensure bench strength for the future is critical given the likelihood that we have not seen the last of such disruptive events as the COVID-19 pandemic. While TD is typically dedicated to the growth of high potentials, an OD perspective would call for an organization-wide development approach to "lift all boats."

Organizations are transitioning to new protocols for flexible work-from-home policies for their employees. Future

investments are likely to be required to outfit the modern workforce with effective team performance tools. Organizations would be wise to focus on developing the "whole employee", especially since the pandemic's advent. The lines between work and home have become increasingly blurred, further exacerbating work-life and work-family conflict. Consideration should be given to how employers can support the creation of suitable workspaces within the home environment and implement programs and policies for in-home child- and elder-care. Employees can be effective and productive working from home; however, proactive and ongoing support is necessary to sustain employee satisfaction, wellness, engagement, and productivity. These efforts can help to ensure the attraction and retention of highly talented knowledge workers.

Second, establish a learning organization championed from the top and promoted, cascaded, and rewarded throughout all levels of the organizational hierarchy. Demonstrate to employees that the development of their human capital through education, training, on-the-job learning opportunities, personal visioning, goal setting, and targeted coaching and mentoring will be key to their long-term success and that of the organization. Organizations that promote a learning culture will be better positioned to recruit and retain a talented workforce, something likely to be increasingly critical post-pandemic when global economies begin to recover, and good job opportunities become more prevalent. Reskilling, upskilling, and implementing an LMS can be appropriate ways to ensure a whole-workforce approach to learning and talent development without incurring excessive costs.

Third, keep culture at the forefront. We have all heard the oft-quoted saying attributed to Peter Drucker that 'culture eats strategy for breakfast' (Campbell et al., 2011, p. 263). Organizational cultures have been frayed during the pandemic as impromptu meetings, hallway chats, coffee connections, and lunches have been replaced with video meetings and employees working from home or on differential shifts to promote social distancing. As

Cummings and Worley (2015) note, "a well-conceived and well-managed organization culture, closely linked to an effective business strategy, can mean the differences between success and failure in today's demanding environments" (p. 552).

Culture is the glue that holds an organization together and finding virtual ways to solidify that glue takes deliberate effort. One way to do this is to encourage and cultivate relationships between co-workers, colleagues, managers, and employees. Intentional coaching and mentoring can help with this, and team meetings focused on learning and development. A strong culture works on both levels, i.e., for individual employees and the overall system. Shared values, norms, and basic assumptions provide a sense of belonging and socialize employees into an organization (Schein, 2017). In this system, employees develop their social capital by building relationships as they facilitate the larger work of the organization as well as their individual development. We believe the "both/and" perspective of OD and TD is essential to create and sustain a positive, learning-focused organizational culture.

Finally, given the global challenges we face, we must think about harnessing OD and TD approaches to engage at the trans-organizational level. Organizations must become flexible in creating safe and productive environments as society adapts to future crises that may likely resurface. Communications with neighboring countries must improve to share and self-report new pandemics that affect world populations. Solving problems requires full cooperation and transparency. Discoveries for testing, treatment, and developing vaccines can be a joint effort among nations, bringing to the forefront accelerated medical intervention protocols. Neighboring countries must cooperate to protect our common, human interests and solve world problems to achieve global health and economic security.

OD principles and practices are uniquely positioned to facilitate such safe and productive environments because OD focuses on improving effectiveness by improving the human condition. OD methods acknowledge the dynamic nature of

work and organizations and are employed to build collaborative and flexible human-centered solutions for growth and change. Using OD methods to build relationships and trust within and between organizational systems can also improve TD practices. Finally, OD is driven by humanistic values; therefore, OD and TD's combined approach, a focus on the many and the few, can better prepare organizations and employees to respond positively to disruptive change, such as that caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

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