This article critically examines whether practice reflects Organizational Development (OD) as described in academic writing in the Human Resources (HR) profession in the UK.

Whilst there are features of the academic definitions of OD that appear prominently in practice, there are also significant differences. In particular, OD roles in practice in the HR profession appear to be much less consultancy orientated. Also striking is the apparent lack of emphasis on culture and behavioural issues. Within the UK HR profession, the lack of clarity in a contemporary definition of OD gives rise to a disparate and interchangeable use of the terminology.

Does OD practice within the HR profession in the UK reflect the academic rhetoric?

In the last decade, the practice of OD within the Human Resources (HR) profession in the UK has proceeded apace, as evidenced by the number of job advertisements for OD specialists placed in newspapers and trade magazines. Still, there appears to be continuing confusion in the literature about OD – what it is and what it comprises.

A recent study analysed job advertisements for OD professionals within the UK HR profession and compared the resultant data with the literature. It appears that the continuing confusion in the literature about OD may be a result of primarily descriptive/prescriptive writing that neither reflects nor is reflected in current practice within this professional group.

The academic subject and (more significantly) its variations

What does the academic community have to say about OD and, more specifically, what do they say about the practice of OD within the HR profession? The authors Greiner and Cummings suggest that OD is difficult to define, particularly since the boundaries are blurred by the development of techniques and approaches. Robbins also reflects the difficulty in defining the subject area, putting forward the view that it is not an easily defined single concept.

Cummings and Worley present four definitions of OD from Burke, French, Beckhard, and Beer. Common features of the definitions are that OD:

- applies to managing planned change in the strategy structure, and/or processes of an entire system in a flexible manner;
- is based on the application or transfer of behavioural science knowledge and practice;
- is related to organizational culture; and
- is oriented to improving organizational effectiveness.

Armstrong suggests that the traditional domain of OD declined from about 1980 onwards. However, areas such as change and culture management continued to be of interest to the business community, but only when those areas were results driven and more clearly linked to shorter-term business outcomes.

OD – is it an intrinsic function of HR?

The (US-based) Cummings and Worley do not take the view that OD is an intrinsic function of HR; and, whilst giving a small number of instances of OD being practiced in organizations in HR functions, French and Bell clearly describe it as being a behavioural science consulting role. Cummings and Worley appear not to embrace or even acknowledge HR function
professionals as being involved in the profession of OD. They describe OD practitioners primarily as consultants. In their view as to how the discipline has expanded and been applied by other professional groups, HR does not feature in their sample list.

Other UK-based authors who are critical of OD include the much cited Gill and Whittle, who describe the environment in which OD practice commenced as being replete with a lack of theoretical foundation, euphoria, and inadequate understanding and diagnosis. Their view is that disillusionment with OD grew, with a recognition that costs outweighed benefits, the social system approach was no longer politically fashionable, and managers and academics had become increasingly critical of it.

There appear to be contrary indications as to what OD is in the USA (and in most UK) generated academic literature and what it comprises in professional practice in the UK. In UK practice, it usually sits within the HR function.

In terms of OD and the HR function, Ruona and Gibson focus on the investigation of the links between HR, Learning and Development and OD, and discuss in some detail the convergence of Human resource management (HRM), Human Resources Development (HRD), and OD. The US-based Ruona and Gibson trace the origins of HR, HRD and OD and consider that, although they have evolved from three different fields, they are becoming increasingly linked.

The lack of clarity in a definition of OD: at what level does it sit?

To return to the issue of sourcing documented academic research on OD, the difficulty of a clear definition arises. Searches on the term ‘organization development’ can generate articles on a range of topics e.g. management development, group dynamics and change management. The area where there appears to be most confusion is in change management where it appears the use of the term OD is considered as being synonymous with change management. There is a significant body of literature on the disciplines considered to be a subset of OD, such as change management and management development.

However, many of those writing within fields such as change management would not define change management as being under the subject umbrella of OD. Rather, they appear to consider OD a subset of the discipline of change management.

OD and HR – the chicken or the egg?

This leads into the deliberation over whether OD is a subset of HR or HR is a subset of OD. With the OD roles often being the more senior roles, it might be the latter.

In public sector practice, it is not clear whether OD is a subset of HR or vice versa, or whether they are both viewed as complementary but different processes. Debate continues.

Sectoral Differences

Interestingly, those who have previously written on the nature of OD have not commented on sectoral differences; however, we identified a marked difference in the recent UK study, with a much higher occurrence of OD roles in the public sector. Of the 41 job roles advertised, 35 were public sector roles, five were private sector, and one was in the voluntary sector.

Traditionally, public sector organizations tend to advertise vacancies (they are under internal and external pressure to demonstrate more openness and transparency in the use of public monies); whereas private sector organizations may have more choice in using other routes (such as agencies) to attract applicants.

Whether or not this is the case, the number of public sector job roles in this study does seem to be strikingly high. In terms of any content differences, there were too few private sector roles in the study to draw meaningful conclusions on differences between the content of the roles between the sectors.
OD practice within the HR profession in the UK

Whilst OD practice within the HR function barely features in the academic literature, it appears to be of high importance in the UK HR profession, but there are limitations in the extent to which generalizations can be made in the study. However, it would suggest that there is a gap in the academic literature with regard to informing practice in the HR profession in the UK.

Equally, the HR profession could be criticised for the wide-scale application of the OD label to practice without reference to scholarly sources to both clarify what OD encompasses and to review the literature for research that has been subjected to academic rigour. With no other sources of published academic research to clarify what OD practice in the UK HR profession is, this exploratory study is useful in giving some clarification as to what OD is and what it comprises in the HR profession. Especially so if Ruona and Gibson are proved correct in their suggestion that the convergence of the HRM, HRD and OD disciplines is indeed key to the future viability of HR.

As with scholarly writing on OD, there appear to be some common patterns in the usage of the term ‘OD’ in the HR profession in the UK. This also appears to be based on a range of assumptions and with significantly blurred boundaries in its usage. However, there are significant differences in matching the academic and HR profession usages of the terms.

Whist not a feature of academic writing, there are indications that in parts of the UK HR profession, practice areas labelled ‘OD’ are embraced and claimed as having their natural home within HR. The integration of OD is seen as an important part of the developing profession of HR in the UK. There is a reflection of Ruona and Gibson’s view of convergence in the disciplines of HR, HRD and OD, and that the profession will gain by taking this route.

It remains to be seen whether more clarity as to how the term ‘OD’ is used follows on from this trend.

Advice for Academics

Given that the body of academic literature on OD is primarily descriptive/prescriptive rather than theory per se, there appears to be significant gaps between the rhetoric and the reality. There are implications in this situation for both academics and practitioners. Research and academic writing appears to be lagging behind practice rather than driving the way forward. In terms of the relevant academic communities, they cannot expect to have impact, nor are they likely to participate or be considered credible and relevant by the practitioner community.

Advice for Practitioners

Whilst leading academic writers in HR have so far either ignored or have been highly critical of OD, the development in practice continues to gain pace. Practitioners can also be criticised for applying practice under the banner of OD, without seeking to source rigorously tested academic theory to inform their work. Since the application of practice could have enormous long-term impact to the employee stakeholder group (and the wellbeing of individual employees within that group), the application of practice without reference to research or guiding principle is concerning. Clarity and advice on the strategic contribution of OD is needed so that organization leaders can understand how they might best organize and leverage benefits from the practice community.

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