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Barratt-Pugh, L., Hodge, S., & Smith, E. (2020). Learning and development practitioners: identity, profession and future trajectory. *Asia Pacific Journal of Human Resources*, 58(2), 220–246.

Which has been published in final form at:

<https://doi.org/10.1111/1744-7941.12207>

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Submitted to Asia Pacific Journal of Human Resources as:

Manuscript ID APJHR-2017-155

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Title Learning and development practitioners: identity, profession and future trajectory.

Authors Barratt-Pugh, Llandis Hodge, Steven Smith, Erica

Date Submitted 29-Jun-2017

Asia Pacific Journal of Human Resources

Learning and development practitioners: identity, profession and future trajectory.

ABSTRACT

The increasing focus on learning and innovation within organisations has significantly changed perceptions and practices of learning. It has also generated an increasingly diverse learning and development 'profession', constructing an emerging identity and development paths. What are the development needs of these practitioners? Our study of nearly 800 Australian practitioners explored their working roles, development patterns and learning needs in a contested environment. Our purpose was to explore how their practice had changed, what it had become, and what challenges they faced. The practitioner responses are used to model the changing patterns of professional practice, substantiate the emergence of a professional identity, and indicate the imperatives for building frameworks to generate professional development. This knowledge provides a foundation for re-conceptualising the learning and development practitioner domain.

Key words

Training and development; Organisational learning; Organisational development; Innovation; Change-organisational

Introduction

The roles and practices of learning and development (L&D) specialists have changed significantly during the past two decades (Little 2016). Previously viewed as a necessary cost in prosperous times, L&D is increasingly linked to business performance improvement (Chambel and Sobral 2011), with practitioners developing diverse specialisms and business relationships as critical organisational actors. For some time it has been evident that organisations value knowledge generation and innovation as a key competitive advantage (Drucker 2000). As digital innovation radically reshapes knowledge flows through workplaces it contests traditional learning patterns, with new forms of L&D practice emerging. Now, L&D is considered a core function of many organisations (Garavan 2007), with L&D professionals critical for business and national prosperity (Adam 2014).

This paper seeks to explore how L&D practitioner roles have developed, the legitimacy of describing these practitioners as a profession, and what future development they will require. The study gathered data from 800 high-level L&D specialists and Australian Institute of Training and Development (AITD) association members, providing a unique and synoptic perspective of this practitioner body. Australia provided a very suitable case study, as the only nation to experience 23 sequential years of economic growth, and therefore enterprise development (Megalogenis 2012).

The purpose of the study was to examine how practitioner roles had changed, and what development was required, to inform the board of the national training and development association. The study used a broad survey and in-depth interviews to gather an overview of how practitioners perceive their changing roles, what mediated these changes and their identity, and what development they wanted. This exploration raised questions about the legitimacy of calling these practitioners a profession. The findings present an expanding landscape of L&D role diversity and practice transformation. What is new about this study is that it re-conceptualises what constitutes current L&D practice from empirical findings.

Literature review

The study was configured to explore the roles, challenges and development needs of L&D professionals. This section therefore explores how the L&D field has developed and the impact of changes upon the practitioner body. It also reviews concepts of profession, identity, and professional development, to provide a framework for the subsequent analysis process.

Learning and Development work.

Traditionally, educational systems prepared young people for work, with skills enduring until retirement (Easterby-Smith 2011). Three decades ago, the L&D landscape was characterised by manual training for current roles, and identity development for future roles (Cacioppe, WarrenLangford and Bell 1990). However, rapid technological change drastically reduced the shelf-life of knowledge and skills, and instituted lifelong vocational learning as an organisational and individual responsibility (Scurtu 2015). Subsequently, businesses adopted organisational learning agendas, positioning learning and knowledge production as a core capability, often displacing previous compliance-based learning agendas (Casey 1995). By 2000, L&D had become more effective and responsive and to industry needs, through strategic and blended approaches (Dean 1999; Smith and Keating 2003). A decade on, McGraw (2011) confirmed this increased emphasis on performanceorientated programmes, with greater learning sophistication evident in larger companies. Such developments led to an ever-growing network of diverse L&D practitioners, with managers also taking on responsibility for staff learning (Easterby-Smith 2007), as work became about learning, and learning became part of work (Billett 2001). Smith et al. (2017) indicate that the move towards service industries, technological innovation, part-time work, female participation, qualification standards, and the discontinuities of the Global Financial Crisis and Resources Boom, all changed the nature and practice of training, and increasing the quantity to specifically to meet quality, technology and regulatory requirements.

The emerging field of L&D practitioners is difficult to define as they perform a wide range of educational and business roles within, and outside enterprises (Hord 2015). Additionally, it is not a discrete field, as these roles now permeate schools and higher education. Thus, L&D practitioners may identify with both their institutional role and their industry focus. Smith (2006) argues that the emergence of L&D within Australia, reflects the convergence of training, career development and organisational development, and their connection with business strategy. Smith et al. (2017), report that training-staff are now more proactive, reacting to external change and negotiating with consultants, without HRM department mediation, traversing adult learning and organisational theory, and working individuals and company strategies (Mayson, 2006). Contrasting organisational attitudes towards L&D underpin this diversity (Poel et al. 2000). Classifying this diverse group of practitioners is therefore complex and challenging as they confront very different organisational needs, strategic perspectives of learning, and business models. Each context produces different practitioner capability and subjectivity (Pryor and Bright 2014), as subsequent paragraphs will explore.

In terms of organisational needs, large and small enterprises have very different training infrastructure capability (Smith & Sadler-Smith 2006), generating approaches that span the systemised to the ad-hoc (Noe 2010). The defined roles of large enterprises contrast with the multiple roles required within small ventures (Jones et al. 2013). However, all enterprises have generated additional roles as national qualifications-based training initiatives are adopted (Price 2007).

In terms of strategic perspectives of learning, line managers vary in their knowledge and perceptions about the 'value' of learning. Managers may privilege and integrate learning, or limit learning to emergency status (Sambrook 2007). These contrasting perspectives result in L&D roles that span working on learning policy to training delivery (Smith 2006), positioning practitioners at the top table, or in the backyard (Buckingham 2012). Those at the top table focusing on generating innovation, while the latter work with deficit training models, skilling for training gaps (Sadler-Smith 2009). This is a very polarised field of practice.

In terms of business models, practitioner diversity is influenced by industry relationships. Company decisions about outsourcing learning, building internal capability, or establishing partnerships, mediates practitioner roles (Gibb 2011). These variations produce practitioners operating as sole training operators, in team-based groups, as HRD consultants, and in employed or self-employed modes (Ruona & Gibson

2004). Each role requires different relational capability in terms of securing work and resources through using 'business acumen' (Davis, Naughton & Rothwell 2004). These skills are increasingly critical for establishing 'return on investment' rationales for clients (Kim 2007; Herman & Kraiger 2009). Finally, practitioners display wider ranges of skills as they traverse a practice continuum that spans from manual training to employee wellbeing, and includes face and virtual delivery (Buckley & Caple 2009). The different needs and perceptions of their organisations, clients, business models and technologies generate significant diversity in this practitioner group (O'Toole, Ferres & Connell 2011).

An emerging profession?

However, is this a diverse practitioner body, or are they forming a learning profession? Teaching, Medicine, the Law, the Church and the Military form the traditional base of the professional landscape (Tobias 2003). L&D practitioners reflect many of the capabilities of the teaching profession, but do they form a separate and distinct profession? The Australian Council of Professions defines a profession as:

A disciplined group of individuals who adhere to high ethical standards and uphold themselves to, and are accepted by, the public as possessing special knowledge and skills in a widely recognised, organised body of learning derived from education and training at a high level, and who are prepared to exercise this knowledge and these skills in the interest of others. (Saunders 2015, 3).

Thus, a profession is a body engaged in significant and cognitively complex service for society, requiring specific education and ethical regulation (Saks 2012). While an obligation to society beyond normal customer client work relationships lies at the core of profession, an alternative perception is that of an exclusive club, seeking to achieve and defend market monopoly (Abbott 1988)!

Professions build and police bodies of knowledge, regulate admission, ethics and learning practices, acting as a barrier between practitioners and clients (Professions Australia 2006). Professions often repel competing organisations, defending their monopoly, and influencing public perceptions. Cruess (2004) indicates that there is no standard definition of the concept of profession, as the concept is itself in a period of radical re-shaping, with quasi-professions such as accounting, architecture, nursing, engineering, pharmacy and surveying, displaying only some traditional characteristics of a profession, but not all (Tobias 2003). To what extent does the L&D network aspire to or form, such quasi-professional status?

A search for identity

As L&D practitioners operate in a new, vibrant organisational space, there is an evident search for a professional identity. The American Society of Training and Development reflects this search through their 1990 rebranding on performance improvement, and 2014 rebranding on talent development. As new technologies and global trade dislocate previous patterns of work, living, and learning, the continual search for individual meaning, identity and direction has been accelerated (Gee et al. (1996). Previous distinctions between employers, contractors, financiers and customers has been fragmented in the knowledge, sharing, and gig 1 economy, leaving workers engaged in a continual re-formation of the self, with work identity a central component (1996). As Legge (1995) suggested, organisational preoccupations with controlling production and employees for stability, have been displaced by agendas valuing self-development and learning for innovation. Self-development is now a required performance (Legge 1995).

Working as an independent contractor on a task by task basis.

The demands on all workers to self-develop and innovate for the organisation are onerous. L&D practitioners are doubly challenged, as they are engaged in the business of developing the identity of others, and simultaneously re-adapting to new technologies and work patterns themselves. L&D practitioners must build personal capability, while they build the capability of their clients. They need to continually accommodate new practices, relationships and capabilities, as their 'identity is never fixed...always in progress' (Clegg 1989, 273), a transient construct continually being revised and changed (Clegg and Hardy 1996).

For L&D practitioners, managing and delivering each new learning experience is simultaneously a self-development project (Devos 2000). Pullen and Linstead (2005) provide a framework based on Deleuze

(1992) that can be used to identify how this 'work on the self' is managed. Their model of extending identity suggests that there are three interacting components: identity events that stimulate change; differing modes of identity acquisition; and identity materials that consolidate the change. Pullen and Linstead (2005) suggest that practitioners self-develop in a seamless enterprising environment of limitless postponements, where there is no final goal, just the next stage of being. How do L&D practitioners view and reflect on their path towards professional identity?

Occupational identity

L&D practitioners often have formal qualifications from previous teaching roles and rich multiple industry backgrounds (Bartlett 2003). However, membership of a broader social network is particularly valuable for extending their practice and identity (Storberg-Walker & Gubbins 2007). O'Toole (2010), argues that often they suffer an 'identity crisis', of being trainers, organisational developers, HRD managers, and learning strategists. All overlapping roles, but with distinct applications and knowledges, and in trying to provide all things to all people, they emerge with a disturbed self. So, L&D practitioners are required to continually extend the self as an active reflexive project, in a process of 'endless amalgamation' to integrate their multiple selves (McKenna 2001). This onerous process is described as similar to 'reconstructing the boat while at sea' (Johnson and Duberley 2003). However, gaining an occupational identity offers a more stable 'mask' in this challenging environment, but is always a work in progress, constantly subject to contradiction, revision, and change. For Clegg and Hardy (1996), learning practitioners are constantly stimulated by what they are not, the images and practices surrounding them, and their struggle to maintain social and commercial relevance. However, the mask of professional identity often comes with the cost of subjugating personal freedom to the codes produced and policed by others (Fox 2000). Perhaps, one of the few ways that L&D practitioners can find a legitimate work identity in the contested theatres of organisational territory, like other specialists, is to be an actor in a wider external network. Angot (2008) suggests, that while professional identity forms early in

63 working experiences, external networks provides the reflective space, partnerships, and materials that guide development.

Constructing future development

L&D practice is now confirmed as an inevitable trend rather than a fad, due to the need for innovation (Van der Veen 2006). Given this, it is important to know what structures may facilitate the complex development requirements of L&D practitioners? Significant changes in learning technology and needs indicates that future development practices will not be like the past. However, the development of new and different modes of learning, raises issues of developing professional occupational standards and values (Lombardozi 2007). Indeed, several researchers now brand L&D practice as a profession, and the practitioners as true professionals (Kuchinke 2007). In contrast, some field-leaders express scepticism about HRD development standards and practices, indicating they are often episodic and myopic (Darling-Hammond 2009). Similarly, critics also indicate that the rapidly changing nature of HRD will inevitably mean that current practices will always be inadequate models for future needs (Long and Ekermann 2007).

In this volatile and evolving environment, those managing development need to break from past traditions, developing new practices and pathways for self-development. Scharmer (2009) suggests that traditional 'collective social forms', like professional associations, may be displaced, just as workplace values and structures are being displaced. Scharmer also suggests that future learning patterns will accelerate learner and action centred practices, focussing on flexible local groups of learners who will sense needs and co-initiate to evolve networks that create new local knowledges. Similarly Barnett (2012) asserts, that the current focus on psychomotor and cognitive skills, will be displaced by a focus on the affective domain, developing dispositions. Chan et al. (2001) talk about four spaces of emerging networked-learning, blending foci on communities, projects, structures, and classroom patterns. Bonk (2005) suggests that future learning will be more mobile, individualised, self-determined, self-directed, workplace connected, and on demand. Davidson (2009) confirms the need for such learning patterns to be self-generated and networked for collective credibility, by using technology to provide connectivity and simulation (Aldrick 2004). L&D practitioners with their unique capability, knowledge, and passion for development are strongly placed to develop these new learning patterns.

In summary, L&D practitioners have experienced rapid changes in their work environment, work demands, and technologies. While training is still required, their role now encompasses multiple forms of strategic

learning generation. It is a contested environment, where practitioners continually reconstruct their identity. The shift towards knowledge work and a digital economy has increased the emphasis on learning, fuelling the growth of a diverse body of practitioners, seeking legitimacy for their capability, as an emerging quasi-profession. How do these practitioners perceive their past and present work roles and future development needs?

The research method

This study explored the changing roles and development needs of L&D practitioners, constructing 'an up to date model of membership needs'. It focused on three linked research questions: what were their roles; their challenges, and their development needs. However, the reflective nature of data-gathering inevitably encouraged respondents to explain how their roles had changed, exploring these patterns, and conceptualising future issues (Kennedy-Clark 2015), and this is the specific focus of this paper. Funded by the AITD, the study was conducted by a multi-disciplinary team from three universities, with VET, educational, and management expertise. A national Steering Committee of highly experienced practitioners negotiated the study-focus, validated instruments, and facilitated access to practitioners.

We adopted a mixed methods approach as it suited the complexity of the research goal and national data collection (Creswell & Plano Clark 2011). The study was designed with four phases; gaining research ethics approval and reviewing literature; interviewing leading practitioners; surveying practitioners nationally; and analysing data and report drafting. In phase one, a literature review of L&D practice and theory was used to draft a systematic model of L&D work and roles, subsequently reviewed and fine-tuned by the Steering Committee, to underpin the field questions. Phase two consisted of lengthy semi-structured recorded interviews with 16 diverse, highly experienced practitioners, representing the diverse L&D landscape, selected through network contacts to meet our criteria for representing the L&D population. Participants agreed to interview recording and transcription, some more than one hour in length. In phase three, an online ninety-nine question survey requesting responses on demographics, contextual and historical roles, working relations, challenges and development needs, was distributed to 2,825 AITD members and L&D practitioner networks, generating nearly 800 responses. In phase four, the interview and survey data were analysed to detect dominant themes, with factor analysis of the survey data identifying 'clusters' of roles and tools. The emerging strong and enduring themes were explored, debated and modelled by three independently operating researchers, and subsequently validated by industry leaders.

Findings - learning and development futures

While the study findings were based on both the broad survey responses and the interviews with highly-experienced professionals, this paper focuses specifically on interview responses about the changing role and development needs of the practitioners. Overall, participants indicated a major growth and diversity of the L&D body as learning and knowledge became critical for organisational innovation and competitiveness. The following quotes are typical of these responses.

Oh, it's changed a lot. It was fairly black and white back then....delivered in the classroom and there just wasn't the diversity and complexity of programs. It wasn't seen as importantas it is now to organisations. The main thing is now it's very connected to change in organisations, and I don't think it was used as a change agent as much back then.

I suppose the best way to sum it up is it used to be called training; it's not anymore.

Participants suggested that L&D has moved from a service function to an essential component for organisational survival and growth. They indicate that the integration of learning and work has become increasingly legitimate, permeating supervisory job descriptions. The diverse managers, from IT specialists to managers and senior managers, now have responsibilities for learning, as do individuals.

....the integration thing.... between production of work and production of learning.

I think the challenge in particular is to recognise how - as learning has become more of a core organisational production that it no longer resides in one person or one set of people.

The responses provided evidence that reflective organisational learning approaches have permeated many workplace L&D programmes, combining activities to build both individual competence and group capability as a strategy for business development. Learning appeared to have become a legitimate business production in many larger organisations, as the quotes from high-level respondents indicate.

As learning now has become a core production of most-larger organisations, it's no longer about hiring facilitators. It's about people who are looking at the strategic learning cultures....learning development professionals now sit at high tables.

I think it's almost moving out of HR into its own stream. HR is now seen as a fairly formulaic area done by people who don't have the imagination and the creativity of L&D professionals..

These emerging discourses have had a radical impact on the role, influence and demand for L&D professionals. The participants suggested that L&D practice had emerged from a supporting, peripheral and often externalised business activity, to become a core organisational production, often focused strategically on generating cultural change and innovation. Similarly, they perceived that L&D practitioners now resembled a 'professional' group with diverse technical capabilities, national networks, and in strategic relationships with organisations.

So it's one of the things that I encourage our customers to do when they're putting the business cases together, is to move away from the ROI that might be wanting to demonstrate on this particular piece of training and talk more philosophically about the importance of training and development as a key part of your value proposition to your employees and a key part of the business strategy to accrue capability and knowledge in the business.

However, as with all paradigm changes, while they reflected on the significant change in the roles, capabilities and influences of the leading practitioners, many indicated a strong involvement in traditional skill delivery as Australian National figures indicate (NCVER, 2016). This means that the current T&L body is now far more diverse, exhibiting significant differences in the level and expertise at which practitioners are operating.

We'll have so many courses, you'd put out a calendar and you'd have standard courses throughout the year, and they were pretty much year after year the same courses that you ran. You didn't have the diversity and the ability to respond to organisational needs (that occurs now).learning needs are much more individual. There is much more diversity in what different industries want and the roles that specific individuals play....much more variety.

The study evidence indicates that these practitioners are now more highly qualified than previously, reflecting higher education expansion and the imperative of acquiring strategic business perspectives to justify learning programmes in business terms.

I completed an MBA to boost my consultancy business....one of my colleagues has just done a PhD in the management development area.

So they'll be competent in both aspects, both the business aspect and they'll be very proficient in terms of L&D and trends in L&D. But also blend that with the OD aspect of people and agility and resilience. Dealing with very, very clever people that have completed masters and qualifications like that are coming into the business. An entirely different set of expectations - very, very strong people skills.

Diversity appears to be the overriding characteristic of the field and the profession evident in their responses and reflections. Diversity, both in the level at which these professionals work, and in the increasing range of services they market. Coupled with the significant growth of the field, this means that, L&D practitioners now consist of a wide range of networked groups.

There are a group of people who are newer to the industry area who are engaged in basic facilitation. They may need to develop skills and negotiation and contracting or whatever; whereas there are other people who are working at a much more strategic level in terms of learning design or even building infrastructure for learning and cultural design....different strata.

The practitioner responses indicated that while L&D diversity spans from basic manual training through to strategic HRD policy formation, there are several other criteria that segment the L&D community: private and government, apprenticeships and life coaching, training sites and flexible delivery, national standards and customised programmes. The focus on learning content and skilling now encompasses attitudinal development and cognitive development.

The fact is that we now pay people for reflection.... and guidance - so it's mind and body from that point of view. So there's work coaching, individual counselling and lifestyle coachingespecially as people are time poor.

[There is] far more coaching and guiding managers in their role in supporting the building of capability.

The demands by industry for accountability have strengthened the profession by displacing satisfaction with learning interactions with return on investment and value for business impact through time shifting blending modes. Practitioners indicate that this diverse field has been unified by the development of nationally regulated training packages (AQF 2013; Smith and Keating 2003), and by the use of proprietary international learning systems.

They want to have the information compressed, readily available offered in a variety of formats, face-to-face plus online, plus a discussion, plus a practical project, plus, plus, plus....

....it was also a good way of seeing how blended learning could work delivered on a week-to-week basis over a web-based conferencing system. (Its) really the future isn't it,people can do some learning in their own time, perhaps on line. They can come in and have some discussion, but then they go away and put that into practice.

In addition, the interviewees suggested that L&D practice is no longer the preserve of dedicated specialists. As managers aspire to leadership, they require an understanding of people and cultural development processes and practices.

(People development has) now become a line on job descriptions - which means even more that diversity is the key.

The respondents discussed how this vertical and horizontal diversity has generated multiple career path options, with individuals moving out of Government controlled tertiary institutes and into a competitive market, forming synergistic relationships with commercial organisations and industries. Relational networks have become the business territory of these emerging professionals, and simultaneously act as their development platforms.

Most of my learning today is self-directed or on the job.

I couldn't live without that group of people, because they've all moved on to bigger and better jobs and bigger organisationsyou just ring people up and go, do you know anything around this?

....but I also use other social networks to keep myself informed and to learn from others. So (its) actually is the backbone of my personal learning. That's where I do most of my learning.....those networks actually short-cut you to what's going on, in some ways.

Many participants indicated how changes in technology now enable most employees to access learning systems and knowledge from most workplaces through web connections. Knowledge previously 'owned' by training professionals is now freely distributed and increasingly common knowledge.

In fact what's been really interesting is that technology enables social networks,....I'm talking about communication and connection, the fundamental mechanism by which all learning happens. I'm talking about collaboration and co-creation.

...and put your hand up if your company doesn't allow Twitter and Facebook at work and typically, one-third in the room puts their hand up. These are the top (learning technologies) and YouTube is number two. These are the top tools for learning in the world and your companies don't even allow them to be used by employers. Put your head around that. I think social learning is a big one.

The L&D practitioners indicated that the radical change in the accessibility of knowledge has changed the role of the L&D profession from knowledge custodian, to capability facilitation. A career path has emerged where practitioners can progress from operational through to strategic learning roles. The practitioners indicate that business engagement is increasingly about negotiating and contracting that displays understanding of business imperatives. Direct training contracts are being increasingly displaced by industry negotiating with practitioners to brokerage learning initiatives that combine a range of service delivery options and providers.

What an L&D broker will do is bring in registered training organisations to carry out the training. No, they're not necessarily delivering anything at all. They're actually shapers and brokers and managers of the process.

I think L&D people see themselves as more sophisticated than just trainers. They've stepped out of the training role a long time ago. They see themselves as brokers for skills needs in firms.

High-level practitioners indicated how they now required considerable technical learning knowledge to negotiate performance improvement programmes for specific business applications, using diverse networks of partners, coalescing around a contract and then dispersing. Yet there is strong evidence that they have limited time to invest in such networked learning opportunities.

So I think my colleagues are probably a bit like me. We're all a bit time poor.

Perhaps most importantly, with knowledge freely available from every smart phone, the L&D role, as with lecturers and librarians, will continue to change dramatically. Knowledge provision is now only the initial phase of learning activity, with the networking of learners and subsequent learning reinforcement through mentoring and coaching rising in importance. The participants indicate that networking is an imperative not just to collaborate on contracts, but also to build personal learning, and business knowledge.

...but I also use other social networks to keep myself informed and to learn from others. So that, I would say actually is the backbone of my personal learning. That's where I do most of my learning.

Most of my learning today is self-directed or on the job.

Analysing the emerging patterns

The purpose of this study was to explore how practice had changed, what it has become, and what development practitioners required. There were two clear themes emerging from the responses. First, they indicate that L&D is a very different and diverse work practice compared to that previously experienced. Second, the evidence indicates that developing L&D capability is far more complex than in previous decades, when the diversity and demands were less onerous. This diversity and complexity appears to be driven by two main factors. First, there is great diversity in the context within which practitioners work, and experience diverse employment relations, partnerships, work foci and hierarchical positions. Second, there is great diversity in L&D capabilities, with wide ranges of experience, knowledge, skills, and business management capability displayed. The modelling of this L&D landscape is the focus of another concurrent publication (Citation removed to preserve blind review integrity).

The focus of this analysis is how the practice has changed, and then on what development challenges remain. The reflections of practitioners provided the evidence to create a comparative model of how the practice appears to have changed and matured over two decades. The field expanded to include many new areas of practice that coexist with traditional roles, encompassing learning strategists and fork-lift driver trainers.

...the whole field has changed over a 25 year period in that previously there were defined lumps of learning which were external and perhaps not very linked....

The following table draws on participant reflections to indicate how they see their changed occupation.

Insert Table 1 approx here.

Given such changes, to what extent does the emerging profile meet the criteria of a profession? The evidence is complex and contested. This is a body of practitioners developing an emerging professional identity, while simultaneously the diversity of their roles and knowledge militate against consolidating professional conformity. In addition, the criteria for such judgement remain obscure, as the social definition of a profession is currently being reshaped by society. What is evident, is that there is a growing body of L&D practitioners who see themselves as a defined group, with specialist skills and knowledge. But, to what extent do they identify with or aspire to the criteria associated with a profession or perhaps a quasi-profession? The following table maps their responses against the relevant criteria.

Insert Table 2 approx here.

Most practitioners indicate that they are drawn to the practice to further learning for individuals and enterprises, meeting a strong component of profession. The passion to serve and develop others was a strong theme of the evidence, often displaying altruism towards 'service' beyond the normal customer-client relationship. However, while some regulatory and ethical codes have been developed by relevant L&D associations (AITD 2017), there is limited policing and self-regulatory practice in evidence, with limited barriers to practitioner 'enrolment' in such associations. Many practitioners we interviewed displayed high-level qualifications, but this resourceful group are not yet in the majority (Edward 2005). There is yet little evidence that associations of L&D practitioners operate as intermediaries in a policing role, to admit, regulate and defend practitioners, or engage in monitoring client complaints and restricting entry to the occupation, as do some professional associations. Yet this may simply be an indication of the immaturity of this profession, or an indication that new quasi-professions will not exhibit the same patterns of rigor associated with established professions, as they adapt to the new digital knowledge, gig, and sharing economy (Cruess 2004). In summary, it appears many L&D practitioners see themselves as a quasiprofession offering a valued public service, as reflected in their practice.

We now move onto the issue of individual practitioner identity. It was evident that the majority of participants related more to specific organisations/industries in their early careers. They reported that later experiences re-shaped their perspective and identity as part of a broader body of similar practitioners. In the terms of Pullen and Linstead (2005), career events mediated their selfperceptions. Individuals reflected on specific triggers that changed their identity, leading to reidentification as an L&D professional. Events of gaining qualifications, self-managing business relations, and joining networks, generated passionate narratives, indicating the instrumentality of these activities in forming professional identity. In terms of acquiring identity capital materials (Pullen & Linstead 2005), the 'titles' acquired at work, network collegiality, their brokering activity, and the language of learning and business experiences, appeared influential in building professional identity. In terms of identity formation each individual attributes their changing perceptions to very different mediating influences, but the evidence highlighted the role played by self-determination, resisting the 'training' classification, promoting a strategic learning discourse, the importance of managers legitimising learning, and national programmes giving learning legitimate names, places and spaces within the workplace. Practitioners indicated that a combination of these interactions contributed to the formation of their occupational identity. This analysis indicates that the Pullen/Linstead/Deluze model (2005) provides a useful framework for exploring professional identity in this context, and mapping individual or collective identity change.

Turning towards the development needs for L&D practitioners, the inherent diversity presents a significant challenge (Easterby-Smith 2009), but practitioner narratives did indicate several future guidelines where perceptions aligned. First, the diversity of practitioners dashes any hope that one-size initiatives might fit all. There will be very different and segmented learning needs for a heterogeneous group who work at different levels, with different skill sets, confirming the assertions of Hord (2015). Second, the rapid, discontinuous nature of business makes relational negotiation skills an imperative for L&D practitioners, in order to reshape changing business contracts needs, validating Nelson and Quick's findings (2008). L&D development initiatives should mirror this reality, positioning these time-poor professionals at the centre of the learning network with a menu of options. Third, most L&D practitioners require a wide network of contacts and business knowledge. Their developmental activity should provide opportunities to increase their knowledge of technologies and potential partners for customised programmes, and should be a 'learning clearing-house', as indicated by Noe (2010). Fourth, the diversity of their practice spans a continuum from training provision through to facilitating strategic cultural change, so development activity will often need to be segmented for specific special interest groups, as postulated by Mayson (2006), and may be encouraged to form organically. Those involved in performance improvement, will not share the interests of those generating innovation, or those involved in apprenticeship scheme management. Fifth,

learning development platforms will have 'to mirror' the blended delivery options that practitioners deploy for their own learners, confirming the suggestion of Buckley and Caple (2009). Engaging through innovative digital means will act simultaneously as an additional knowledge conduit, and as learning about additional media options. Sixth, while higher-level practitioners share some common understandings about managing strategic learning management, their experiences, gained from organisations with very different business imperatives, will have developed diverse context related knowledges, reflecting the 'chaos-career' concept previously outlined by Pryor and Bright (2014). While competition and confidentiality may prevent openly sharing such knowledge, some practitioners indicated their desire to broker round-table discussions for 'mixed' industry groups as self-facilitated master-classes, building their professional and partnership options. Seventh, professionals continually voiced concerns over time restrictions for learning, validating the comments of O'Toole (2010). There is therefore a need to integrate their work and learning, a dilemma previously described by Poel et al. (2000). This underpinned some ambivalence towards L&D associations, with practitioners preferring selfinitiated occasional business orientated forums, chosen to add value to their own commercial business.

What was clear from the practitioner responses was that the L&D field is established, and playing a significant business role (Jones 2016). Emerging fields often exhibit extreme divergence in infancy and then coalesce around convergent themes as they mature (Kwon and Alder 2014). The L&D domain provides evidence of a maturing field, consolidating occupational identity and exhibiting quasi-professional characteristics. The initial need to network for self-protection and for the propagation of the occupation may have passed, with learning established as core, rather than peripheral, practice. The impression given by several practitioners was that they would continually reassess the business value of their investment in associations and networks, which now include local, national and global relations. So, servicing practitioner development will require a continued focus on gathering customer needs and feedback, providing options and choice, and utilising new modes of networking. Just as L&D professionals have responded to industry demands, there is a strong indication that L&D professionals will now require their professional development networks to reflect the same ROI focus, providing resources for their each practitioner's unique personal and business needs, a significant challenge. Just as these professionals adapt to designing and delivering learning for a changed paradigm, so they will require the same mobile, individualised, on demand, network connected, workplace linked, self determined, project simulated, learning patterns, for themselves (Bonk 2005; Davidson 2009). As one participant indicated,

....(Professional Associations) need to send a very strong signal that it isn't a part of a training paradigm anymore.

Conclusion

This paper contributes to re-conceptualising the L&D practitioner domain in three ways. First, it provides a unique evidence-based representation of how the field of practice has changed and indicates the main forces mediating that change. Second, the paper has evaluated the domain in terms of the concept of 'profession', providing evidence of the emerging characteristics of this body of practitioners that establishes a rationale for such theorising. Third, the paper has explored the current contested 'identity' of such practitioners, how it is being reshaped and what future development these L&D professional will require.

73 The L&D profession has enjoyed significant growth over two decades with expected annual global growth of 5-8% (US-DLET 2016), retaining the traditional skilling platform, and building from that platform a strategic learning focus on building knowledge, cultures, wellbeing, capability, and innovation. The evidence from this study has produced a contrasting map of what the practice used to be, and what the profession is today. While many higher-level practitioners identify as L&D professionals, this is still an emerging quasi-profession in a changing environment. However, it should be a sustaining profession, as learning will remain a core component of organisational strategies. Rapidly changing digital knowledge will accelerate both business needs and learning cycles. Indeed, just as the face and role of learning has radically changed, so the needs of L&D practitioners have also changed. Passive engagement with competitors in local and national associations is now less relevant to their continued development needs. As learning specialists, their future development activity will need to reflect the best of the emerging flexibility, mobility and individualisation of learning networks that they themselves now author.

The authors express appreciation to the AITD and membership for the funding and voices of this study.

Key Points

- The field of learning and development practice has expanded and diversified to meet the needs of the knowledge economy and innovation.
- L&D practitioners have developed an occupational identity from their more fluid working experiences, and are emerging as a quasi-profession.
- Future professional development practices should reflect the same learner and project centred virtual networks that practitioners themselves author.

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