

Professional Development for Human Resource Management Practitioners in NEST Second Tier Emerging Markets: A Three Country Study

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This paper reports on a research project conducted to investigate the professional development needs of Human Resource (HR) professionals in three emerging markets: Kazakhstan, Philippines and South Africa. Furthermore, the research sought to identify the extent to which and in what ways these development needs were being met. The research adopted a qualitative methodology applying a Grounded Theory methodological framework for data collection and analysis. Ninety-five, semi-structured, face-to-face interviews were conducted between March 2013 and October 2015. The data revealed that to a significant degree HR practitioners are having to initiate, and self-direct their own professional development which, they report, is much less beneficial than undertaking sponsored professional development events that are structured and group orientated. The research also found that there are numerous barriers to professional development including nepotism/favoritism, lack of money, lack of time and lack of available opportunities. There are implications for organizations, the HR profession and employees generally in relation to the proficiency of HR practitioners and the impact a lack of proficiency could have on the organization. Further, perhaps quantitative, research is encouraged to explore the issues raised here further with larger and other similar populations.

INTRODUCTION

This paper reports on professional development opportunities (PDOs) for Human Resource Management (HRM) specialists in three second-tier emerging markets; Kazakhstan, Philippines and South Africa. In 2010 Banco Bilbao Vizcaya Argentaria, an influential Spanish multinational banking group, introduced a new economic concept which distinguished between the top performing emerging economies and the next group of emerging economies (BBVA, 2016a). The top group; emerging and growth-leading economies (EAGLEs), comprises seven countries with expected incremental GDP in the next ten years to be larger than the average of the G7 economies, excluding the US. These countries are: Brazil, China, India, Indonesia, Mexico, Russia and Turkey. The second group of emerging markets, know as NEST countries, comprises nineteen nations with expected incremental GDP in the next decade to be lower than the average of the G6 economies (G7 excluding the US) but higher than Italy's. In 2014/15 South Africa, Philippines and Kazakhstan are classified NEST countries (BBVA, 2016b). It is important to note that membership of both the EAGLE and NEST groupings is dependent upon economic performance and, as such, the composition of both groups will undoubtedly change periodically.

This study is not intended as a comparative study. The authors consider the social, cultural, historical and political contextual differences between Kazakhstan, South Africa and Philippines to be so extreme as to render any meaningful qualitative comparison for the purposes of scholarly insight redundant. Rather, this study is designed as an exploratory research project with the goal of illuminating some of the issues HRM specialists in second-tier emerging markets face in terms of their professional development. Indeed; the countries selected for the study were selected opportunistically for ease of access to research participants in that this paper's lead author consults, lectures and trains HRM professionals in those countries included in the study.

This paper is divided into the following sections: firstly, a review of the recent relevant literature. The second section goes on to describe the research design, data collection method and data analysis activities undertaken. The third section of the paper presents the research findings and a discussion of those findings. The paper then ends with a conclusion, recommendations for further research and an acknowledgment of the study's limitations.

LITERATURE REVIEW

There appears to be a void where published scholarly literature pertaining to professional development for HRM specialists in Kazakhstan, Philippines and South Africa might otherwise be. Furthermore, there is noticeably very little scholarly work on any related topic in the case of Philippines and, to a slightly lesser degree, Kazakhstan. This results in a truncated literature review but it does underscore the originality, timeliness and potential value of the present study.

A review of literature from the leading academic publishers reveals that in the case of Philippines there is almost no output regarding organizational management issues. The closest relevant studies include Gupta and Kleiner (2001) who researched management styles and national culture in Philippines concluding that business success is linked to managers understanding and adapting their management style to accommodate the cultural norms and customs of Filipinos. An earlier study (Burke, *et al.*, 1998) did look at professional development but the focus was on women only and all types of managerial roles. The study was a comparative look at the Philippines and Canada. Of interest to the present study, Filipino women were found to have a high participation rate in workplace training and development and rated those programs highly in terms of usefulness for career advancement. The study concluded that there is a positive correlation between career outcomes and participation in workplace learning. The only paper to include both the Philippines and HR (Kuntz & Roberts, 2014) reported on a survey of 91 HR workers of an Australian company's outsourced HR department located in the Philippines. However, the study pertained to employee engagement and identification. One conclusion of the study was that goal clarity is a key predictor of employee engagement and identification. Other than this, the scholarly literature on Philippines is largely preoccupied with topics such as climate change, governance and corruption, sustainable development, issues in higher education and issues relating to natural disaster management.

The scholarly literature pertaining to Kazakhstan in recent years reflects an increasing interest in governance issues and public sector reform (Kupatadze, 2015; Monobayeva & Howard, 2015; Oleinik, *at al.*, 2105; Bhuiyan, 2011; Bhuiyan & Amagoh, 2011; Knox, 2008). While the vision for public sector reform in Kazakhstan encompasses general management development (Akorda, 2013; Caspionet, 2012; Delaney, 2011; NCSJ, 2006) there is no focus in the aforementioned papers on the development of HR managers. There have been several studies reporting on HR generally in Kazakhstan and these have consistently argued that HR in Kazakhstan is poorly developed, inconsistently administered and to the detriment of employee best interests (Davis, 2012; Davis & Abdiyeva, 2012; Davis & Callahan, 2012; Davis & Mukhametshina, 2012; Davis & Pavlova, 2012; Davis & Yugay, 2012; Minbaeva *et. al.*, 2007; Tatibekov *et al.*, 2004). Papers on Kazakhstan commonly refer to various forms of corruption, such as nepotism, as a significant barrier to organizational development and the work of HR as it relates to, for example, recruitment. While these studies have highlighted the challenges facing HR and HR professionals in Kazakhstan, there has been no study to date on professional development for HR managers in the country.

In respect to South Africa, HR would appear to be further developed, more professionalized and more recognized than in the Philippines or Kazakhstan. A good deal of literature exists on HRM in Africa generally, but, perhaps surprisingly, the focus has not been on South Africa, the African country with the most developed level of HRM. Significant studies on the development and positioning of HRM in other African countries in the past ten years include: Uganda (Bagire, 2015); Angola (Silva *et. al.*, 2015); Ethiopia (Ijigu, 2015); Kenya (Njuguna *et. al.*, 2015); Nigeria (Onyema, 2014; Ihionkhan & Aigbomian, 2014; Akinyemi, 2012; Oladipo & Abdulkadir, 2011; Okpara & Wynn, 2008); Ghana (Adomako *et. al.*, 2013; Ofori *et. al.*, 2012); Eritrea (Ghebregiorgis & Karsten, 2006) and Mozambique (Webster & Wood, 2005). These studies have found positive correlations between HR practices or competencies and business outcomes or employee behavior and attitudes. While all of the above listed studies endorse the importance of HRM to employees and organizations, none have focused on the professional development needs or opportunities for HR professionals themselves.

A similar picture is reflected in the scholarly literature as it relates to South Africa. Major studies have found that HR is important to organizational success and makes a difference to the working lives of employees. For instance, Pietersen and Engelbrecht (2005) found that the competence of HR professionals is key to their credibility in the wider business and is an important factor in building trust in HR among other managers. Other studies have similarly concluded that HR competence makes an important contribution to employees' ability to embrace values such as collaboration, trust, openness and mutual support (Singh, 2014) and organizational development and goal achievement (Erasmus *et. al.*, 2010). HR policy and practice has also been linked to desirable employee outcomes. Bagriam and Sader (2007) discovered, for example, that family friendly HR policies and practices have a positive impact on levels of employee organizational commitment. Very recently, Schlechter *et al.*, (2015) reported that non-financial rewards such as work-life balance practices have a positive correlation with employee perceptions of job attractiveness. As with the other studies conducted in other African countries, it has been noted that HR in South Africa still has challenges ahead. Spies (2011) observed that there exists a significant gap between commonly recognized workforce skills and those skills employees rate as personal strengths in self-assessments on the subject.

RESEARCH DESIGN

This research project adopted a Grounded Theory Research Methodology (GTRM) to inform the design, data collection and data analysis work associated with the research. While there are various forms of GTRM this project adopted the GTRM proposed and primarily developed by Cathy Charmaz (2006; 2007; 2008; 2014). Charmaz's GTRM is paradigmatically and epistemologically constructivist whereby the researcher and research participants co-create meaning through interaction during the research activities. Therefore, the researcher is an active player in the research process rather than an disconnected observer. According to Charmaz (2006), GTRM is a systematic, inductive and comparative approach for conducting research that has the goal of generating a theory. Typically, GTRM begins with an observation, broad question or experience of some phenomenon, this is then contextualized and leads to the posing of research questions the answers to which are sought through data collection and analysis. The GTRM process is not linear as is the quantitative research process. Data collection, analysis, interpretation and theorizing occur simultaneously. Once data ceases to reveal new information; when, for example, interviewees are only repeating what has already been said in earlier interviews, then data collection ends.

The current project had its genesis in a series of informal discussions and professional development programs involving HR professionals in the countries attended by the study. These interactions brought the realization to the fore that HR professionals in these countries appeared to have a lot of unmet development needs relating to their roles and that this appeared to be as a consequence of limited professional development opportunities. The research coalesced around the interest to discover more about what professional development the HR practitioners in these emerging economies were accessing

and to understand the extent and nature of the limitations they were experiencing in regards to their professional development.

The project then progressed through contextualization of the central research problem and this resulted in the decision to explore the issues through a non-comparative lens. Specifically, it was observed that the historical, political, cultural, social and organizational contexts within which the participants worked were significantly different when the three countries were analyzed. Formal data collection then commenced through individual, semi-structured interviews with HR professionals and with a review of the literature. GTRM proved to be a good choice for this study as it is considered an excellent research methodology when no other theory or no adequate theory already exists to explain the phenomena under investigation (Creswell *et al.*, 2007) - which the literature review has demonstrated to be the case here.

Semi-structured interviews were chosen as the primary data collection method. Aside from semi-structured interviews being a proven and widespread data collection method in qualitative research, they were chosen for this research project for some additional, specific reasons. For example; according to Brinkmann (2014), semi-structured interviews are well suited to exploratory research which seeks to understand people's experiences and the problems they encounter in their work. Semi-structured interviews also fit well with the constructionist orientation to research because when interviewing the interviewer is an active participant in the construction of shared meaning and the production of talk (Brinkmann, 2014; Cooksey and McDonald, 2010). Furthermore, semi-structured interviews are well suited to exploring emergent issues which materialize unexpectedly (Cooksey and McDonald, 2010); and are most appropriate for studies such as this one where very little is understood about the research topic. Perhaps of most consequence, semi-structured interviews are widely advocated as being very suited to GTRM generally (Douglas, 2003; Charmaz, 2006; Creswell *et al.*, 2007; Urquhart, 2013; Bryant, 2014).

Consistent with GTRM, data collection and analysis were conducted simultaneously (Charmaz, 2006; 2014). Data were analyzed using a coding process which makes the data progressively more focused and the analysis progressively more theoretical. Data analysis was conducted manually whereby interview transcripts were initially coded line-by-line (open coding) and then subjected to three further coding processes (selective coding; axial coding and theoretical coding). In addition, the authors made use of analytic memoing (Saldana, 2014; 2012) during data analysis. The exact coding process the authors followed to analyze data is comprehensively explained by Charmaz (2014).

A total of ninety-five HR professionals participated in interviews between March 2013 and October 2015. Of these, forty-four were from Kazakhstan, thirty from South Africa and twenty-one from the Philippines. The interviewees all worked in HR either as generalists or specialists in areas such as recruitment, employee relations, talent management and so forth. The interviewees ranged in seniority from front-line supervisors through to senior executives and had varying levels of experience and qualifications. Interviewees represented both the public and private sector. As the research participants were opportunistically recruited using non-probability convenience sampling (primarily 'snow-balling') the eclectic nature of the sample was anticipated. Consistent with the GTRM and the explicit decision to undertake an investigative, non-comparative study, the sample served the purposes of the project. Interviews typically lasted for about an hour and were audio recorded with the participants' permission. Standard protocols relating to informed consent, participant privacy, data access, usage and storage, information confidentiality and interviewing ethics were adhered to.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Demographic data revealed that of the total participant group, fifty-nine were female and thirty-six male. Fifteen worked in the public sector and eighty in the private sector. Seventy-three participants had at least a bachelor's degree and of those twenty-two held a master's degree. Forty participants identified as HR generalists (regularly performing two or more different HR roles) and fifty-five identified as specialists (regularly performing one role or two closely associated roles). Thirty-one participants identified as junior level or front-line managers or supervisors; twenty people identified as mid-level

managers; thirty-three interviewees said that they were senior managers or heads of departments and eleven identified as senior managers, executives or directors. Seventeen of the participants were aged thirty or younger; thirty-nine were aged between thirty-one and forty; twenty-six people were aged from forty-one to fifty; ten interviewees were aged fifty-one to sixty and the remaining three participants were aged sixty-one or older.

Tables 1, 2 and 3 present some findings from the interviews. Each of the three tables records the number of mentions of particular items given in response to a particular interview questions. Table 1, for example, shows all the types of professional development the interviewees desire. All types with at least five mentions across the ninety-five interviews are listed. The tables reflect that some responses were mentioned multiple times by particular interviewees during their interview. The percentage of total mentions for all listed items that each item gained is also shown in each table

TABLE 1
TYPES OF PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT DESIRED (n= 462)

Types of Development	Mentions #	Mentions %
External formal training	96	20.8
Conference	70	15.1
Professional association activities	60	13.0
Formal knowledge sharing	53	11.5
Coaching	44	09.5
E-learning	31	06.7
Informal self-study	28	06.0
Informal knowledge sharing	21	04.5
Don't know	14	03.0
Professional certification	11	02.4
Formal self-study	9	02.0
Any	9	02.0
Mentoring	6	01.3
Job rotation / secondment	5	01.1
Special projects	5	01.1
Total	462	100

While the interviews identified many different modes of professional development, the top four most mentioned were common in that they are group-based rather than individual forms of learning. This suggests that networking, learning from others and knowledge sharing are important to the interviewees. The interviews also revealed that formal, structured learning is more valued than semi-structured, informal learning. Also interesting is that situated learning in the workplace (mentoring, rotations and projects) was the least popular mode of professional development. Participants commonly said that the three most desired modes of learning were the least accessible to them because of cost and scarcity of opportunity. More money and organization are required by employers to help HR practitioners access conferences and external training. Collaboration between organizations to share costs could be a partial solution and in Kazakhstan the formation of a national HR professional association is much needed. In Philippines HR practitioners could connect with more developed close neighbors such as Hong Kong and Singapore to aid their professional development.

“We don't have the knowledge within the company so I have to look for external courses but the good ones are in Europe and it is too much money and too much time to go there. Also, HR conferences don't come to Kazakhstan. We must go to them but how?”
(Female, Kazakhstan, 29 years)

“Mostly I want to learn from others in our field; from foreigners. I once went to a conference in Melbourne but it was once in the lifetime. It was great, I learnt so much. I really think the cost is equal to the benefits. Mostly now I learn by myself from the internet which is ok but not enjoyable.” (Female, Philippines, 35 years)

“I have been to a few training courses and two conferences but I am a director. The junior HR staff don’t get the same opportunities. Mostly they are doing internal in-service training. Basically the expense and time out of the business usually means our training requests are vetoed higher up”. (Male, South Africa, 48 years)

Table 2 presents all the topics the interviewees said that they would like to access to further develop their professional skills and knowledge. The table reflects that the most pressing needs are those most immediate to role performance and therefore suggests a perceived shortfall in role proficiency. It is arguable that if practitioners are in need of fundamental skills and knowledge to do their jobs then this may have a profound impact on the quality of HR outcomes for those organizations and employees impacted. Poor recruitment practices, for example, can prevent an organization from hiring the best employees in the market. Poor retention practices can result in a high turnover rate which is costly and disrupts the flow of daily business. Perhaps the lack of professional development and the extent of its need is best highlighted by the fact that several interviewees said they didn’t know what development they desired or replied that they would take any development offered. Knowledge that is less job-specific and less strategic was not considered as a priority for further development by most interviewees. As such it would seem prudent, based on the present research, that professional development investment for HR practitioners in second-tier emerging economies be targeted at advancing core role knowledge and skills.

“Right now what I most need is to know if what I am doing in my job is right, or the best way. Some training on workforce planning would be great for me because I’m basically just guessing or relying on past experience.” (Female, South Africa, 37 years)

“We don’t know what’s being done in developed countries so what can we measure against? I mean, what is best practice overseas in America or Singapore? We don’t know but that knowledge is out there.” (Female, Philippines, aged 30)

“I want to know about how to control employees better. How do we manage the change of nowadays to work better with employees? Then I want to know about how to measure the HR results to show the business. For me I need a lot of development.” (Male, Kazakhstan, aged 43)

TABLE 2
DESIRED SKILLS / KNOWLEDGE (n=591)

Desired Skills / Knowledge	Mentions #	Mentions %
Job-specific knowledge / skills	101	17.1
General HR knowledge / skills	77	13.0
Employee management	71	12.0
Dealing with nepotism / favoritism	63	10.7
Global best practice	59	10.0
Assessment / evaluation skills	40	06.7
Strategic HR	39	06.6
Facilitation skills	35	06.0
Internal consulting	26	04.4
Tools and models	20	03.4
Leadership skills	15	02.6
Integration HR with the business	15	02.6
Measuring return on investment	12	02.0
Negotiation skills	8	01.3
Relationship building skills	5	00.8
Research skills	5	00.8
Total	591	100

Table 3 highlights the challenges and barriers to accessing professional development experienced by the interviewees. The most commonly mentioned obstacle was being able to be granted the time to attend events. Typically, interviewees expressed that they are too busy to attend off-the-job development and that this was either their own decision or a management decision to refuse off-site development requests. Many interviewees said that there was not a dedicated development budget they could access and that training requests had to compete with many other non-development business needs for funding. In Kazakhstan six interviewees said there was no staff development at all in their organizations; it simply was not available for anyone. Several interviewees said that money was only available for generic or compulsory training such as legally stipulated training. In Kazakhstan and Philippines favoritism and nepotism was cited numerous times as a reason why many people are overlooked for development opportunities. The point was made by several Filipino and Kazakhstani interviewees that one needed connections or influential relatives within the business to benefit from professional development which the interviewees perceived as a bonus or luxury. In South Africa two interviewees said that one's relationship with the supervising manager influenced your development opportunities.

TABLE 3
BARRIERS TO PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT (n= 575)

Barriers to professional development	Mentions #	Mentions %
Time (availability)	136	23.7
Money (availability)	121	21.0
Non-financial resources	74	12.9
Favoritism (others receive development)	70	12.1
Lack of available opportunities	60	10.5
Money (other priorities take precedence)	49	08.6
Timing	30	05.2
HR not considered important by the business	18	03.1
Lack of management support	10	01.7
Obtaining a visa to travel	7	01.2
Total	575	100

“I can’t get away from my job. I’m already covering one person who quit two months ago and there’s so much to do. Even if I applied to go to some training course it would be denied. I can only go during my vacation, but I’m doing that.” (Female, South Africa, 50 years)

“We don’t have an opportunity to do development for our jobs because our company does not have this. I have been here three years and nobody has been to a training or anything like this. It is just ‘do your job, be quiet and don’t ask for anything or you are fired’ this is Kazakhstan.” (Female, Kazakhstan, 31 years)

“There’s no money for development, it is considered a luxury. Because, you know, people are used to it so now they don’t ask and they don’t expect it and so now this is the norm; no development and no expectation. I think we are becoming stupid and falling far behind countries where people get the trainings and the development.” (Male, Philippines, aged 40)

In addition to that already discussed, further findings of the research project include that of the 95 interviewees, only 28 (29.5%) had participated in a non self-initiated formal, structured professional development activity specific to their role of HR generally and not self-funded in the past twelve months. However, 82 (86%) said that they had engaged in some form of self-initiated, self-funded informal professional development activity relevant to their role or HR generally in the previous twelve months. Self-funded activities tended to be reading books, websites or magazines. The sponsored development activities were primarily external training and seminars or conferences. Of the 28 who attended sponsored events, 23 (82%) said that the experience was worthwhile, beneficial and effectively developed new skills or knowledge. However, only 37 (45%) of those who engaged in self-initiated development activities said the same. Only 16 (17%) of interviewees said that they held membership of a recognized professional association for HR practitioners and just three of those people had their subscription fee paid by their organization.

CONCLUSION

This research project has highlighted several issues relating to professional development for HR professionals in selected second-tier emerging nations. The data suggest that the cost of formal development activities is prohibitive for many and makes accessing available opportunities very difficult. Development is also difficult to find time for because of very heavy workloads and the lack of priority organizations place on HR skill and knowledge development. There are also fewer development opportunities available than in fully industrialized countries meaning that those in emerging economies often have the added cost and time burden of traveling overseas to access professional development opportunities. Other challenges include nepotism and favoritism which the interviewees claimed prevents development opportunities being awarded on merit or on any transparent criteria. This was especially noted in relation to Kazakhstan. In terms of the skills and knowledge participants identify as a need, dealing with nepotism and favoritism was mentioned numerous times. Interviewees highlighted many different development needs as important but the fact that those most mentioned appeared to be fundamental HR competencies related to role performance underlines the urgency of development for these people and the organizations they serve. The evidence that lack of support and a low prioritizing of professional development are common tends to indicate that HR professionals in these countries may continue to be denied the important development they require in order to contribute in meaningful ways to organizational strategy and goals.

Respondents also indicated that their preference for development is formal, structured and group-oriented. This suggests that opportunities to network and learn from others are important and valued above informal and individual learning modes. Unfortunately, the most desired forms of professional development are the least available because, in part, of cost and time constraints. The lack of organized events such as conferences and events through professional associations, especially in Philippines and Kazakhstan, was a significant barrier to accessing new knowledge and skills. Participants also highlighted that the majority of development activities they engage in are self-initiated and self-funded which are delivering, generally, unsatisfactory results. Those fortunate enough to have been involved in formal, structured sponsored events reported a far higher level of benefit and satisfaction. It suggests that a greater investment in formal development would be beneficial to both HR practitioners and their organizations. Indeed; an important conclusion for the study is that HR in general should proceed to become more professionalized in the studied countries. This would help elevate the status and esteem of HR in general, the work and achievements of HR and of HR practitioners. This could be leveraged to gain greater organizational funding for HR projects and the professional development of HR practitioners.

This research project has been exploratory in nature and further investigation is required to better understand the complex issues tentatively surveyed here. The study has highlighted, though, that further research is warranted and could be beneficial to begin addressing the apparent shortfall in meeting HR practitioner needs and the perhaps serious implications of this for employees and organizations in emerging economies. Undesirable consequences might include, for example, poor outcomes in relation to local and global competitiveness, organizational development and fostering an integrated people-business strategy. The fact that the skills and knowledge those interviewed identified as most important relate to fundamental role performance is indication that many HR practitioners lack the depth and breadth of competence required to perform their tasks well or, perhaps, even ably. This represents a lost opportunity for organizations and employees to achieve excellence and to compete in human capital domains (e.g. talent retention; recruitment; employee engagement and so forth) in the marketplace.

Further research might like to consider including other emerging economies as part of a broader study and perhaps capturing more participants through a quantitative survey. There is also opportunity to further explore some of the issues raised here such as forms of corruption and the relative invisibility of HR as they pertain to professional development needs and opportunities.

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