

Training and Development Function in Omani Public Sector Organizations: A Critical Evaluation

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Training and development of employees has become a core function for most organizations worldwide and has gained center-stage in recent years. The training and development of public sector employees is vital to any country as it affects its bureaucracy and policymaking. Using a case study approach, this study investigates the state of the training function and its effectiveness in eleven Omani government organizations as they aim to build and develop a competent workforce with the localization of the workforce. The study finds that there is a strong need to draw up an integrated HRD and training framework which would be capable of building a training & development architecture in Omani government organizations and fostering flexibility, creativity, team learning and collaboration among their employees at the workplace.

INTRODUCTION

We are living in the information age where knowledge management has become an important issue in most organizations worldwide. Organizations regularly describe themselves as learning organizations and encourage continuous learning, with employees' training and development emerging as a central part of their people management strategy. Indeed, one key way to evaluate an organization is by examining the way that it views and values its staff; whether it sees them as a commodity whose value should be maximized at a minimum cost or as a resource which should always be developed to its full potential (Mabey & Salaman, 1997). Recent research has shown that the latter approach is most effective in the long term, and organizations today are striving hard to make sustainable investments in their human capital. It enhances their organizational performance and competitiveness, as well as keeps their employees well-developed, productive and engaged. A long-term strategic investment in human capital is required and resorting to quick fixes and gimmicks will not contribute to human resource development. Ulrich and Brockbank (2005) prescribe that HR function has to be a business partner, a role which may have many dimensions like business expert, change agent, knowledge manager, and consultant. There is need for the continued and ongoing strategic collaboration between HR function and key stakeholders to maximize the effectiveness of the HRD strategy (Mankin, 2009). These facts are relevant for all types of organizations, be they public sector, private sector or non-governmental organizations. With this in mind, the present paper attempts to explore the dynamics and efficacy of the training and development system in the public sector in the Sultanate of Oman.

TRAINING AND DEVELOPMENT IN PUBLIC SECTOR: EMERGING ISSUES AND CHALLENGES

The training and development of public sector employees is vital to any country; it affects the quality of its bureaucracy and policy making, as well as the representativeness of its administrative systems (Maor & Stevens, 1997), and in few countries, employment in public sector itself is creating challenges for the concerned governments (Mohammed & Ingo, 2012). Just as training is a core function in private sector organizations, it is also central to the public sector, whose employees need to be trained to face the new challenges and pressures for innovation created by the current atmosphere of increased globalization. One could argue that training and development are even more important in the public sector as they tend to produce mostly intangible services that defy calculation (Kee & Black, 1985). Learning and training have become synonymous and it is essential for organizations to develop a talented, motivated and engaged workforce if they are to respond to today's business challenges.

Centrality of the Training Strategy

Training and development has become a key issue for organizations worldwide, an issue which continues to gain center-stage, being as relevant for the public sector as for the private. The strategies and policies articulated by public or government authorities indicate the degree of importance they give to the provision of human resources training and development. Normally, such strategies aim to upgrade employees' knowledge and raise the level of their performance (Emanuel, 2007; Haslinda, 2009). Establishing a sound training strategy and training policy is vital; it must also involve all the stakeholders of the organization. It is very important to recognize that training and development must be a strategic priority rather than simply a tactical or knee-jerk response. Moreover, training and development strategy and policies must be seen primarily as means of assessing and addressing skill deficiencies in the organization, and must be conceptualized with this in mind (*See also*, Mabey & Salaman, 1997; Maor, 2010). The culture of public sector organizations is very different from that of the private sector, in that the government sector work environment tends to be very rigid and bureaucratic, and training usually takes a back seat (Alan & Mike, 1993). Recently, however, public and government sectors worldwide have faced demands to become more responsive and proactive, and the public sector in Oman is no exception. The government of Oman has chosen to follow the path of E-governance and is working hard to achieve this goal. They now need to bring the same dedication to adopting the management techniques utilized by private organizations. As Bradley and Parker (2001) argue, public sector organizations everywhere are facing pressure to do this, and have no choice but to follow this path. Similarly, Clifford and David (1996) demonstrated that negatively construed personnel policies in the public sector would negatively impact duties of both the practitioners and employees.

Training Policy, its Goals and Objectives

Once the need for a training strategy has been accepted, an organization must carefully create an overall training policy which will provide a framework for training and development activities. This policy must be fully documented and shared across the organization. Clardy (2008), for example, argues that the policy needs to be put in writing if it is to provide an effective mechanism for structuring and governing the training function of the organization. In a large organization, a written policy also helps to communicate key concerns to the whole workforce, integrating them into its efforts and empowering them in its implementation. A second key issue to remember when designing a training policy is that it should emphasize the goals and objectives of the training rather than the methods and procedures. Au et al. (2008) found that training policies which focus on the specific training methods and procedures frequently end up being far less effective than those which focus on the goals and the desired outcomes and effects. This approach is often highly challenging for public sector organizations, who tend to focus on design and curricula and may have minimal flexibility. In addition, public sector organizations often fail to properly evaluate the real effects of their training programmes. For them, simply conducting the

training is seen as success, and they rarely examine what is achieved by the learners and what skills and information are transferred to their job performance (Rinne et al., 2011).

If a training programme wants to motivate its employees, it must make the goals and objectives of the training program clear. Employees can then visualise their career goals and will become interested in the training offered. If, however, they are forced to attend a training program where they see no added value, the effect may actually be counterproductive. As Haslinda (2009) observes, organizational policies which force uninterested employees to attend training courses may lead to negative attitudes and seriously limit the effectiveness of the training; there have been many cases of this in the public sector. Furthermore, as found in Palan's (2007) study, having goals and outcomes helps in evaluating training programs by showing, for example, whether any training activity's failure to achieve its objectives was because a specific action or work duty was neglected or because of a weakness in the whole system. Adopting an appropriate and effective mechanism for controlling and evaluating training will provide such information. This will definitely help to bridge the gap in the realization of the training objectives and ascertain the return on investment (ROI), a key factor in any evaluation in an organization.

Designing Training Programs and Motivation of Employees

As is well known, the training process consists of four basic and consecutive steps which reinforce each other. These are: identifying of training and development needs, designing training and development intervention, its delivery, and the evaluation of the training and development intervention. This is also referred as a systematic training cycle (STC), a generic framework used for many years to guide the design of the formal training and development interventions (Mankin, 2009). Yorks (2005) calls it a cafeteria-style delivery of program, it is referred as ADDIE training model—analysis, design, development, implementation, and evaluation which emerged after the World War II (Allen, 2006) whereas, the STC model emerged in 1960s in UK (Bratton & Gold, 2007, cited by Mankin, 2009).

There are a number of factors which are key to creating a cost-effective and successful training plan. First, it is vital that training programs always be designed in alignment with the firm's business strategy. In reality, however, it has been found that this element is often neglected. This is particularly true in public sector and government organizations, which believe strongly in having a well-defined business mission and vision, but rarely translate this into a proactive HR and training strategy. They need to realize, therefore, that the process of planning work-related training activities requires both a solid understanding of the organization's needs and also a detailed assessment of the capabilities and skills of employees chosen for the training courses (Ferdous & Razzak, 2012). This is particularly important in situations where there are limited resources allocated for training and development but where employees have extensive training needs, with improvement needed in a wide range of skills and other competencies (Ho et al., 2011). In the case of public sector organizations, the bureaucratic and reactive organizational culture creates an additional hurdle for those coordinating and adopting a proactive training intervention. Secondly, it is essential that organizations prioritize their training programs and adopt training agendas for a specific time period, rather than having a piecemeal and *ad hoc* training plan. Palan (2007) recommends the development of an annual training plan based on both a competency analysis and on systematic development plans; if this system is established, *ad hoc* training can be avoided.

Another factor to bear in mind is the need for induction training for the new employees to be included in the overall training plan, as recommended in Ice's study (Ice, 2009). Indeed, orientation or induction training is now seen as forming an important part of any training strategy; it is also referred to as on-boarding. Such training serves to make new employees more quickly aware of the organization's culture, mission, philosophy and work expectations. Effective induction training usually emphasizes the basic skills and knowledge that new employees need to settle in and start doing their jobs effectively (Ice, 2009). In practice, induction training plans are usually created in reference to development plans and are also used to assess new employees' skills and figure out the further training they need. Indeed, identifying training needs is a prerequisite for all training activities; without an adequate needs analysis, training is likely to result in employees simply going through the motions (Palan, 2007). Such a situation will yield

no positive result and will fail to reach the training goals, a potentially damaging outcome for any organization.

Training Effectiveness

There have been numerous studies suggesting that there is a direct relationship between work environment and practices on the one hand and the effectiveness of training on the other. For instance, Harley et al. (2000) found that establishments that offer many fringe benefits and have innovative workplace practices are more enthusiastic about providing formal training and are likely to spend more on their training programs than other organizations. The research also found that employees in such organizations were receiving more hours of both formal and informal training. Surprisingly, when measuring the effect of transferring training climate to work environment on other measures of training, the results show indirect impact on knowledge acquisition and the transfer of learning to the workplace (Tziner et al., 2007). Other researchers also investigated this phenomenon and concluded that training reputation has a direct influence on the minds of the employees and the perceived training transfer among the trainees. (*See also*, Kally et al., 2005; Sahinidis et al., 2008).

When we talk about the effectiveness of training, management support is a crucial issue in the transference of learning at the workplace and many empirical studies have indicated the importance of the role of management in the training function. Highlighting the strategic objective for public organizations, Rehman et al. (2011) revealed that the continuous support and involvement of management is a prerequisite for achieving the strategic goals of the organization. Clardy (2008) also notes the importance of securing the approval and support of the top management or the board of directors when an organization adopts a training and development policy. In fact, there has been a great deal of research about the importance of such support and involvement hypothesized in training as well (Anvari et al., 2010). The seriousness of the top managers' concern about training and the degree of their support for it can be shown in how well the size of the training budget allocated meets the demands of the organization. Haslinda and Mahyuddin (2009) also feel that the size of the financial budget allocated to any specific training plan can be used as a direct indicator of top management's level of commitment to the training function (*See also*, Haslinda, 2009).

Other factors also help to build a learning climate. For example, many studies emphasize that line managers need to be involved in all stages of the training process if the training effort and initiative is to ensure added value (Palan, 2007). In another study, Au et al. (2008) emphasizes the role of co-workers' support in the workplace in facilitating knowledge transfer after training. Such studies have proved conclusively that establishing management support and providing a conducive work environment where new learning and knowledge can be applied without any fear of reprimand are necessary to provide the employee with a proactive learning environment (*See also*, Ho et al., 2011). This is not only true for the private sector, but is also highly relevant to public sector organizations in Oman and elsewhere (Karim et al., 2012; Karthikeyan et al., 2012).

The Importance of Evaluation

Evaluation of training is the final step in the training process in any organization. Its function is to help to identify and rectify any errors made in the implementation of the training strategy. The success of the entire training process thus depends upon the development of the right kind of metrics and tools for measuring its effectiveness. Moreover, these metrics and tools need to be identified from the beginning, before HR and training professionals start to plan training inputs or activities. The failure to adopt a reliable review system has been reported as the most important reason for the cases of attrition occurring after employee training (Palan, 2007). Haslinda and Mahyuddin (2009) prescribe a useful identification framework to help policy-makers in their assessment of the return on the training investments. Dionne (1996), however, finds that the process of evaluating training activities is highly complex and involves many stakeholders; researchers, trainers, and managers all need to participate in the development of a globally accepted standard for the training evaluation process.

It is in the light of all these issues that our case study was carried out; it evaluates eleven public sector organizations in an attempt to understand the inherent dynamics of training and development in the public sector in Oman. The study always bears in mind that implementing a western-based education and training system in a country like Oman is bound to involve challenges and needs significant modification if it is to be effective (*See also*, Wilkins, 2003).

PRESENT STUDY AND ITS METHODOLOGY

Training and development is an issue taken very seriously by the Government of Oman; its Vision 2020 emphasizes the need for development of the workforce and the effective management of its talents. Public sector organizations in Oman are playing an important role in the Omanization process and it is they who are largely responsible for building the pool of talent who must effectively manage public organizations now and in the future. The present study is an attempt to understand and evaluate the effectiveness of the training and development intervention in public sector in Oman. A case study approach was adopted to study the effectiveness of training function in eleven (11) public sector organizations. The selection of organization was based on the accessibility to these organizations and their importance. The data collection started in March 2011 and lasted for around 10 months. Unstructured interview was conducted with training managers, training directors, HR managers, senior managers, middle level managers, and employees as well. The CAIPO framework (Easterby-Smith, 1986) was used for evaluating the effectiveness of the training which focuses on the context evaluation, the administration of the training strategy, the contents of the training given, how the training process is evaluated, and the outcome of the training intervention. This analysis was reinforced by the content analysis of the data shared by the organizations studied besides few focus group discussions (three) with the training managers, HR managers, and trainers based in Muscat, Oman representing various public sector and educational institutions. The organizations chosen for this study are following (for the purpose of discussion in the study, they are referred to as organizations 1-11 within the text): Ministry of Civil Services (Organization 1), Ministry of Housing (Organization 2), Ministry of Sports Affairs (Organization 3), Ministry of Higher Education (Organization 4), Ministry of Health (Organization 5), Ministry of Regional Municipalities and Water Resources (Organization 6), Ministry of Agriculture (Organization 7), Public Establishment for Industrial Estates (Organization 8), Public Authority of Electricity and Water (Organization 9), Public Authority of Social Insurance (Organization 10), and Public Administration Institute (Organization 11).

SULTANATE OF OMAN: ITS OMANIZATION PROGRAM AND HR DEVELOPMENT

The Sultanate of Oman is a member of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and occupies a strategic location on the southern corner of the Arabian Peninsula at a junction of Asia, Europe and Africa. It has a total area of approximately 309,500 km² and about 1700 kilometers of sea shore from the Strait of Hormuz in the north to the border of the Republic of Yemen. Oman borders the Republic of Yemen to the south west, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia to the west and the United Arab Emirates to the north and west. Currently, Oman derives 40 percent of its GDP from oil revenues. It is a classic example of a country that built its education system not only to meet the needs of its citizens but also to ensure its ongoing development. Higher education in Oman was privatized only in early 2000. Prior to that, the government had the sole responsibility of providing both secondary and college education. The government has definitely made strides in educating young Omanis, with Omanization (the training and development of Omani nationals) as one of the key parameters of HR planning and training in the country (Budhwar et al., 2002).

The government is making a major investment in the training of young Omanis. In the Eighth Five Year Plan (2011-2015), the government has set aside 100 million Omani riyals (approx. US\$260 million) for the country's human resource development program. The grant also included 1,000 external scholarships for Omani students to pursue graduate studies as well as to study in specialized and technical

disciplines in fields like medicine, engineering, accounting and financial analysis, economics and information technology. According to the government sources, these external scholarships will be in addition to the 130 million riyals (approx. US\$ 330 million) set aside for study grants in the Eighth Five Year Plan (Ministry of National Economy, Oman, 2012). The government has allotted this massive grant so that it can develop the scientific capabilities of Omani citizens whose training is expected to equip them to play a key role in the development of the country (*See also*, Table 1).

In its plan to foster the economic and social development of the country, Oman is also envisaging greater participation by the private sector and a more proactive role for its government sector. Its vision for the future of the national economy-Oman 2020-was adopted in the light of local and international changes and sets out the features of a new strategic transformation on the path of development. This transformation envisages that, in the coming years, the role of the government will be confined to the direction of strategic plans, while the private sector will have to play larger role. In this scenario, the Government bears social and environmental responsibility as it operates in a stable financial and economic environment (Ministry of National Economy, Oman, 2012). For this to succeed, the role of government agencies and of public sector organizations is critical; they are the ones who must facilitate the required shift in the development of an enabling economic and business environment. If this is to happen successfully, a change in both the mindset and the work practices of government sector organizations will be necessary. The proper training of government sector employees can play an important role in creating such an environment and in facilitating the change of mindset and capabilities that will deliver synergy in the present Omani business scenario. The present study evaluates the existing framework of the training system in a number of government organizations and discusses how it can play a more proactive and catalyzing role in the transformation of the mindset and competencies of their employees.

CASE FINDINGS

Training in Public Sector Organizations in Oman

The government of Oman has long recognized the importance of human resource development in general, and has manifested its commitment through education and many other avenues. Like governments all over the world, it also realizes that without training and development, the public sector cannot maximize its use of human capital. Much emphasis is therefore placed on the training of these employees, who will be able to increase their job skills by attending a variety of training and development programs organized either internally or by outside agencies. The government believes that this will be instrumental in bringing about effective and proactive HRD policies. This nationwide commitment has also been translated into the establishment of the administrative apparatus for formal training; this has been done by creating training departments and sections in every ministry, with positions such as training directors, and by allocating them the resources they need.

Training Policy Framework for Public Sectors in Oman

The training policy and strategy for public sector/government organizations is codified in two important documents: the Civil Service Law (CSL) implemented by the government's Ministry of Civil Service (MOCS), and the Scholarship Law (SL) which is governed by the Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE). These two key documents set out the training policy and strategy for the government sector in Oman. In addition, some public establishments and authorities are governed by different governmental policies designed for each of them individually. However, many of the clauses or terms in these independent policies are similar to those in CSL and SL.

As discussed earlier, the basic elements of a systematic approach to training include identifying training needs, designing the training programs, delivering them and then evaluating the whole process. It is important to look at the organizational benefits of the training given and to develop metrics that will measure the return on the training investment (Lechner et al., 2011). This study finds that the organizations do carry out training needs identification as per the government guidelines and are

endeavoring to put in place a training strategy that will serve their strategic objectives. However, most government organizations lack trained and skilled HR and training managers, a situation that means that they face major challenges from the beginning.

Identification of the Training Needs in Public Sectors in Oman

Our study showed that public sector organizations in Oman must each produce an annual training plan; this must always be done in line with the MOCS guidelines given below. The first step is to use a number of tools and processes to ensure that the work-related skills, learning and knowledge essential for employees' development and growth are correctly identified; the process relates this information to the skills and competencies needed by the overall organization. The most common method used to identify training needs is carrying out a job analysis exercise to determine the skills and learning required. In addition, the organizations' Training and HR managers regularly exchange information with training institutions to determine the training programs and courses which might be available in the coming year.

The MOCS provides a five-step standard guideline for determining the training needs of the member organizations; these are as follows:

- Step 1: Looking at the organization's goals and priorities; this is done by the relevant administrative manager and the supervisors of the organization.
- Step 2: Generating data from the employees on the relevant training inputs for their departments and sections based on the organizational goals and priorities.
- Step 3: Collecting data from the supervisors on the career training needs of their employees.
- Step 4: Generating data on the individual employee's training need by asking employees and their supervisors. This step can be seen as developing a consensus on the training plan for the coming year.
- Step 5: The training department of each member organization aggregates all this data, lists the training needs and formulates the organization's annual training plan.

The study showed that employees' participation in the identification of their training needs had both advantages and disadvantages. It is positive in that it develops the motivation of trainees so that they share the ownership of the learning and its transference to the workplace. However, it was found that this participation sometimes creates problem when individual employees are eager to follow an expensive training program which may not be a priority for the department or the organization as a whole. It is therefore essential for the training department of each organization to carefully analyze the identified needs in order to determine the priorities for each department and to plan an overall training program which will work within its budgetary constraints to meet the most pressing of the needs identified (Olds, 2013).

The findings also indicate that the training function in many public sector organizations tends to focus on the long term and on work-related skills, a fact which means that employees' personal development and acquisition of learning is often neglected. This also means that MOCS matrixes and other relevant approaches are inadequate to provide systematic identification of training and development needs.

Another key factor that determines the training activities of the organization is the allocation of finance for training resources. Each individual organization has an overall budget allocated to it out of the state's budget; obviously, the size of that budget affects the size of the budget of each of the organization's departments. Within an organization, each department submits an individual budget plan which must be approved by the organization; the overall process of budget allocation among different departments is based on this approval. It was found that the agendas of many CFOs and State's Financial Controllers do not give high priority to training and development budgets. Respondents from Organizations 1, 9 and 14 stated that the decision-makers often slashed their suggested budget by up to 50 percent. Because of the paucity of funding, these training managers find themselves handicapped; they cannot fully harness the benefits of the training and development they envisage and plan for. Participants in Organizations 1, 3, 5

and 10 made similar comments, all reporting that these cuts made it difficult, if not impossible, for them to implement their training plans.

Designing Training Plans

Our study found that the training plan of each organization is prepared by its HR/Training Department or a related committee on a yearly basis and in a more or less similar way. Basically, the guidelines issued by the Ministry of Civil Service (MOCS) lay down the ways that government organizations must plan, execute, and assess their annual training activities. Using these guidelines has both a positive and a negative impact. For instance, the positive aspect of such standards is that they provide all member organizations with a systematic and standardized approach to the training function. In addition, this approach provides many tools for analyzing skill-sets and training needs; these help organizations to prioritize their training needs on an annual basis. However, the absence of any clear strategic objectives to inform the process means that these annual plans are often repetitive and short-term. It also hinders the creation of a formal long-term training and development plan aimed at developing employees' competencies and enhancing their overall learning.

Even organizations not governed by the Civil Service Law (CSL) tend to suffer the same limitations, largely because of the prevalence of uncertainty-avoidance within their training culture. As a result, training directors not required to follow the guidelines issued by the Ministry of Civil Service (MOCS) still prefer to apply approaches followed by CSL members in order to avoid any of the potential risks that accompany a heavy investment in long-term training and development plans. Two examples where this trend was observed were the Public Establishment for Industrial Estates and the Public Authority of Electricity and Water Resources. The absence of a long-term training strategy in public sector organizations and the non-connectedness of their training to their vision, mission and strategic goals definitely hinder the development of their employees. This also shows the ambiguity of their HRD objectives. In our view, the organizations urgently need to establish a long-term HRD plan which is linked to their objectives, well spelt-out and able to provide an integrated framework for employees' development and growth.

Delivering Training Activities

As discussed above, the annual training plans are prepared by the member organizations and submitted to the MOCS for their approval. The MOCS carries out a quick review, grants the required approval, then forwards copies of the plans to the Institute of Public Administration (IPA), which is based in Muscat, the capital of Oman. The consultants at IPA are then responsible for designing relevant training courses and programs and delivering them to the client organizations (*refer to* Table 2, showing the areas of training programs conducted by the IPA). The IPA thus plays an important, indeed pivotal, role in imparting training to Oman's public sector employees. More recently, however, the increasing demand for training in the public sectors is not being met by IPA alone (*refer to* Table 3). Training managers and HRD heads at most of the selected organizations (Organizations 4, 5, and 9 to 11) report that nowadays education colleges, private training providers, and vendors based locally or outside Oman are being widely used as another source of training provision.

Our research also surveyed the types of training methods used, finding that although in theory Oman's public sector organizations have access to a number of effective training methods which would enhance their employees' knowledge and learning, in reality the lecture method seems to be the most widely used. It was reported by the training and HRD managers that most of the training sessions carried out so far favor the traditional 'chalk and talk' method where the instructor uses a top-down lecture to impart training.

Overall, then, the majority of public sector organizations are not yet ready to effectively apply a wide range of open-learning packages which would cover not only the job-related, but also the interpersonal and developmental needs of the employees. In theory, some of the participant organizations should be able to successfully apply training means such as on-the-job approaches involving employees in managing project teams and assigning them specific task assignments, but at present the lecture seems to

be the predominant training method. However, managers of Organizations 1, 5, 7 and 12 do believe that lectures should be supplemented with other training methods to improve learning outcomes and enhance the quality and effectiveness of the training, so the possibility of change is present.

Evaluation of Training in the Public Sector in Oman

Evaluation is probably the most important part of the training system; without it, one cannot see whether the investment in human capital is producing the right kind of return. Arguably, this step is also the most challenging part of the training process. The challenges are even greater in public sector organizations because of their cumbersome and bureaucratic structure and systems (*See also*, Pineda, 2010). Several of the organizations surveyed saw evaluation as the most important and challenging element in the training cycle in public sectors in Oman, with organizations 1,2,3,9 and 11, describing it as critically important for the functional assessment of the training process itself and also of its alignment with the organization's vision, mission, and objectives. An evaluation of the whole training scenario, including the action plan for training strategy, is indeed essential if public sector organizations in Oman are to fully assess the training process they practice.

The present study revealed that the public sector organizations governed by CSL employed three key elements to evaluate the success of their training activities, namely: its administration, the quality of input and the training process. Evaluation data is obtained from two sources: the trainees themselves and their work supervisors. The reaction of every trainee is recorded in a one-time survey carried out within one week from the end of the training program. Trainees record their viewpoints about the contents of the course, its delivery and what they have learnt from the program. They are also asked to provide feedback on the suitability and relevance of the skills taught, and on the competence of the instructors. The evaluation process also views the transference of learning as a vital element, and therefore seeks to assess how far the new skills and learning are being transferred at the workplace. This information is gleaned from the trainees' work supervisors, who are asked to provide feedback on the impact of their employees' training in the workplace. Sometimes, they fill it three to six months after the completion of the training. While people agree that this aspect of feedback is extremely important, it has proved very difficult in practice to capture the data required. There are a number of reasons for this. The main one is that feedback is requested a long time after the actual training; this makes it difficult for supervisors to assess, and for training management to follow up.

In fact, the study revealed that only one organization received the supervisors' evaluation forms on time; others stated that it takes many follow-ups to obtain them. Some supervisors are even resistant to the training itself. Five organizations reported facing resistance from some supervisors to release their employees for training because of demands of their day-to-day work. They also reported a communications gap between the HR department and others, a gap which creates a serious conflict between those managing the employees' performance in the short term and the HR departments' long-term strategies. These problems indicate that there is a strong need for more effective techniques of following up the transfer of knowledge, both while delegates are taking courses and after they are back at work (Azman et al., 2011). Some of the managers in Organization 2, 3 and 4 suggested that MOCS should design a series of time-interval follow-ups and tests; this would help to improve the evaluation system. Managers in organization 5 also recommended better collaboration between MOCS and the member organizations; they feel that this would definitely lead to a better evaluation of the training process, and make its impact more positive.

Encouragement of the Trainees and the Feedback Process

Encouragement of employees for training is also an important issue which was found missing in this study. Giving constructive feedback to employees both during and after training is vital if organizations are to take full advantages of such activities. Encouraging trainees to learn and perform better is essential to help them transfer their learning to the workplace. It was found that only 3 out of the 11 organizations surveyed take any initiative to recognize and reward employees who achieve excellent grades or otherwise perform well during training, and/or show distinctly improved work performance after their

training course. The recognition that was reported ranges from congratulation letters or small gifts to a financial reward for the completion of a higher degree; the latter is done at the Ministry of Agriculture. However, in other participant organizations, there was neither a verbal congratulation nor even a light pat on the back for an employee who does well in the training.

Another problem that arises affects employees who are awarded scholarships (*See* Table 1) which are governed by the Scholarship Law (SL). While the law identifies clear rewards and recognition for government employees who successfully complete scholarship programs in the allocated time or less, there are serious consequences for those who fail to do so. This puts employees under heavy stress. According to articles 24 and 25 of the SL, the Scholarships Board at the MOHE reserves the right to terminate the scholarship of any employee who fails two consecutive academic years or fails to meet the deadline for completing the program specified by the ministry. In both cases, employees have to reimburse all allowances and tuition fees paid by their employing organization.

Indeed, our study found that the majority of organizations do not perceive employees' failures in training as incidents that need analysis and may have many causes. Instead, the automatic response is to blame the employee; punitive measures are sometimes initiated even before the reasons for the failure are investigated. For the employees concerned, such actions destroy any existing or potential endeavor to keep them positive and keen to succeed in future training programs. This aspect of public sector training and development policy is arguably at odds with the desire to develop individual employees, and with their own motivation to develop.

Lack of Trained HR and Training Staff

In Oman, all human resource manager positions are Omanized; this step was taken before many HR and training managers in the public sector had gained sufficient expertise or qualifications to effectively tackle the challenges involved in developing a training strategy. The most urgent and imperative task facing the public service is to develop the skills of these training managers so that they can successfully fulfill the important role of formulating and managing the entire training function. Many middle managers also lack critical soft skills; the reason is systemic, as many have been promoted into management jobs because of their previously demonstrated technical abilities rather than for their ability to successfully manage people. The current focus is on the development of technical skills for first-line management, but additional training for middle-level managers in these sectors should be a priority. Indeed, enhancing their skills has already been identified as a critical need in the government sector; if this is achieved, it will be a driving force in enabling the transformation of both the workforce and the workplace.

Online Training in Public Sector Organizations in Oman

In recent years, many countries have seen online training becoming very cost-effective and popular (Argiris et al., 2012). It provides many other benefits apart from its low costs. Employees can choose their programs according to the time they have available and the pace of learning is generally more suited to the trainees' lives. This kind of training naturally has particular appeal when budgets are tight. Our survey showed, however, that there was relatively little enthusiasm for online training in the Omani public sector. In most of the selected government organizations, managers, trainers and employees all preferred traditional face-to-face training. They found it more acceptable than on-line methods and felt that it provided the most effective communication and interaction. Their resistance to on-line training is exacerbated by the technological challenges which make it less efficient and less user-friendly than it would ideally be. These challenges include poor network connectivity, lack of Internet connectivity in some cases and the lack of appropriate training facilities.

Despite these challenges, the participating managers generally felt the need to adopt more online learning and provided suggestions to improve its use. Managers in Organization 2 suggested replacing the traditional face-to-face training methods used to teach basic administrative and standardized technical skills with online training. This would reduce the cost and hardship of travel, and would be more convenient and flexible for employees. However, significant problems remain in implementing such changes. Although the public sector in Oman has recently expressed the need for greater use of

information and communication technologies (ICT), it is also true that very few government units have developed reliable e-business infrastructures that could effectively coordinate online training requirements. Thus, despite the keen initiatives undertaken by the Information Technology Authority (ITA), the evolution of e-government has to go a long way before it can work reliably.

Induction Training in Public sector organizations in Oman

Worldwide, induction training has taken on a very important role in the overall training strategy. Its aims are to inculcate right values among new employees, and to help them to get used to a new work setting and find their niche there. However, most organizations in Oman's public and indeed private sectors generally neglect this activity. It was found that the majority of organizations see induction training as an important HR activity but fail to pursue it seriously. In this study, all eleven organizations agreed that a well-defined orientation policy was needed and that it played a significant role in retaining employees, but only three of the eleven reported that they have prepared suitable induction plans for their new employees. There will therefore be a high probability that fresh graduates and the newly recruited staff will start work with only the most basic skills needed for their jobs and many essential skills that training plans have identified as necessary will not be taught.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

There is no denying that the Omani government sector is seriously pursuing the issue of training and development, and the government is trying hard to develop its employees through a variety of HRD interventions. Public sector organizations have adopted change and are now thinking in terms of the benefits of training and the return of the investment on their human capital. However, most of the training and development interventions are still regulated and managed by policies initially promulgated by the Ministry of Civil Services (MOCS) as well as by the later directives issued by the Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE). These are all in line with the MOCS guidelines. Inevitably, in this kind of bureaucratic entity, with a centralized training system controlling nodal agencies and fund disbursement, change is difficult to bring about, and initiatives taken by individual organization are often, unfortunately, stifled.

Comparing our research results with factors that are known to guarantee the effectiveness of training and development leads us to make a number of recommendations for Omani public sector organizations. The most vital element of a training system is its alignment with the business strategies, mission and vision of the organization. The Omani government is striving to create a proactive work culture and to stimulate an enabling and learning-oriented work environment, but the absence of a defined strategy for pursuing a coherent, credible and well-aligned set of HR tools is hampering these efforts.

The role of the head of an organization is the key which gives direction to the organization. In most Omani government organizations our research observed a lack of seriousness at this level towards training in general, with evaluation taking a back seat. There is also a pressing need for a greater level of coordination between supervisors, HR managers, training managers and senior managers. This is essential to improve the effectiveness of the training and harness its positive impact. The budget issue must be also addressed urgently; with the training and HRD departments of these organizations being given enough staff and infrastructure. Many organizations were found to be unable to function optimally because of insufficient manpower and lack of office space or other infrastructure.

There is also a strong need to train HR managers, training managers and other line managers to understand what is necessary to create an HR and training system which really works, and the practical steps necessary to achieve this. Equally urgent is the need to create a HRD climate which promotes continuous and team learning at the workplace, but a deep-rooted change will be necessary if these work values are to be adopted throughout the Omani public sector. The top leadership and line managers have to play an active role in reinforcing such a learning environment by rewarding employees and facilitating a support system to promote competency-building and career development for their employees.

As discussed by O'Keefe et al. (2007), employee participation is also key to the success of the training initiative. It was observed that the present archaic and bureaucratic approach to the selection of trainees and the design of training programs have resulted in employees having little interest in learning; nor do they care about the transference of that learning to the workplace. This problem is exacerbated by a "*Shahada* (certificate)" mindset which urgently needs to be rooted out. Employees' prevailing concern was to acquire a *Shahada* (certificate) through training for their promotion and career development rather than the learning that can be used in their jobs. It was evident that this attitude is a major impediment to the transference of knowledge and learning at the workplace. It kills any enthusiasm for the real learning of new skills and seriously reduces the competence of the public sector employees in Oman.

There are a number of other serious flaws in the training system in the Omani public sector. As well as the budgetary constraints discussed below, short-term and *ad hoc* training plans and a highly bureaucratic and administrative-oriented evaluation system are flaws which need to be rectified. Training departments also need to put more emphasis on the induction and socializing of the new employees if they are to inculcate right work values from the outset and better utilize their human capital. Providing feedback is another important part of the employee development process, but only three out eleven participating organizations do this, indicating a lack of interest in reinforcing the right kind of behavior among their employees.

The lack of cooperation between supervisors/line managers and training/HR managers is another issue of major concern. As noted earlier, the study found that very few supervisors sent in the evaluations on time, a fact which shows their lack of concern for and seriousness about training and indicates the weakness of the coordination between the training and the line functions. As studied by McCracken et al. (2012), an environment which creates a harmonious relationship between employees, supervisors/line managers, training/HR managers, trainers, and senior managers is essential to the success of any organization; but this environment was not found in most organizations studied. It was also odd to find that many CFOs and State Financial Controllers in the public sector gave very low priority to allocating the budget for training and development. Despite the government's forceful advocacy of training, these senior bureaucrats are apathetic towards HRD initiatives.

A further concern is that, in the present information age, when the government is strongly advocating for E-governance and many activities and government services have gone online, public service organizations are currently lagging behind in providing online learning and knowledge management for their employees. This situation needs to be remedied. IT-enabled training must be adopted, with a strong support system for online training set up and properly maintained. There are a number of specific causes of this problem which need to be addressed: the reluctance of the senior bureaucrats, a lack of general and especially IT infrastructure, poor internet connectivity and the traditional mindset of employees which resists new learning methods. Paying attention to these areas will help employees face the demands of the twenty-first century and will promote self-paced learning and development where they can play an important role in choosing and developing their competencies. The Information Technology Authority (ITA) also needs to play an active role in fighting the inertia of the government organizations when facing the need to create an enabling IT environment. The ITA must provide a sense of direction and encourage and enable more up-to-date learning pursuits and methods.

In conclusion, it is clear that there is an urgent need to draw up a HRD and training framework for Omani government organizations that will foster flexibility, creativity, team learning and collaboration among their employees. The responsibility for the delivery of the key training & learning objectives (KTLOs) must be set, and a new organizational structure established that will be capable of initiating such an endeavor. The Omani government must provide additional funds to improve the organizations' infrastructure and should develop a mechanism for decentralizing their training and development function. It is important to amend the policy framework adopted many years ago in the form of the Civil Service Law and the Scholarship Law; these need urgent and thorough revision if they are to properly regulate the employment and learning conditions that will meet the demands of the twenty-first century. If this is not done, and if clear and appropriate training and learning objectives are not realized, Omani government organizations may become mired in ignorance and obsolete skills, unable to adapt to and

keep pace with the changing times and technologies, a situation which would be disastrous. All of these changes are dependent on the will and the actions of the leadership; they are the ones who must forge a new path and initiate the desired changes in the public sector in Oman.

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TABLE 1
TRAINING COURSES ATTENDED ABROAD BY THE GOVERNMENT PERSONNEL
DURING THE YEARS 2006-2008

Countries	2006			2007			2008		
	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total
GCC Countries	204	47	251	193	80	273	231	69	300
Other Arab Countries	149	25	174	174	15	189	246	31	277
Europe & America	81	24	105	92	19	111	123	27	150
Asia	72	11	83	112	19	131	132	22	154
Others	5	2	7	11	3	14	13	4	17
Total	511	109	620	582	136	718	745	153	898

(Source: Sultanate of Oman, Ministry of National Economy - Statistical Yearbook 2009)

TABLE 2
NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS IN LOCAL COURSES AT IPA IN VARIOUS TRAINING PROGRAMMES

Fields of Training	Years					
	2006		2007		2008	
	No. of participants	(%)	No. of participants	(%)	No. of participants	(%)
Public Administration	1,285	58.4	1,323	56.7	1,539	66.8
Financial Management	210	9.5	156	6.7	81	3.5
Clerical Training	536	24.4	648	27.8	477	20.7
Computer Science	10	0.5	14	0.6	36	1.6
Library & Documentation	-	-	22	0.9	20	0.9
Statistics	28	1.3	23	1.0	47	2.0
Scientific Research	46	2.1	52	2.2	11	0.5
Law	25	1.1	40	1.7	55	2.4
Information & P R	25	1.1	55	2.4	38	1.6
Economy	28	1.3	-	-	-	-
Tourism	6	0.3	-	-	-	-
Total	2,199	100	2,333	100	2,304	100

(Source: Sultanate of Oman, Ministry of National Economy - Statistical Yearbook 2009)

TABLE 3
ALLOCATION OF SCHOLARSHIPS AT VARIOUS TRAINING CENTRES IN THE SULTANATE DURING 2006-2008

Training Institute	2006			2007			2008		
	M	F	T	M	F	T	M	F	T
Government	7,268	4,518	11,786	7,897	4,005	11,902	7,858	5,039	12,897
IPA	846	154	1,000	639	172	811	779	224	1,003
Private Institutes	2,678	479	3,157	4,021	623	4,644	3,961	623	4,584
Others	536	60	596	251	62	313	981	118	1,099
Total	11,328	5,211	16,539	12,808	4,862	17,670	13,579	6,004	19,583

Key: M =Male, F = Female, T = Total

(Source: Sultanate of Oman, Ministry of National Economy - Statistical Yearbook 2009)