

# “Human resource development in Arab writing”

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Waed Ensour (Jordan)

# HUMAN RESOURCE DEVELOPMENT IN ARAB WRITING

## Abstract

This study is a systematic review of the existing Arab literature on human resource development (HRD). A review of Arab HRD's theoretical and empirical articles during the period 1964–2016 in peer-reviewed journals was conducted. Content analysis was utilized to examine how HRD is conceptualized, what purposes are attached to HRD and what activities HRD encompasses in Arab literature.

It was found that the basic construct of HRD is employee development, targeted toward "individuals" and encompassing training, education and learning. Arab HRD has a strong performance orientation, and tends to emphasize utilitarian outlooks, as the role of HRD is perceived to be "instrumental" and "outcome focused". HRD in Arab literature falls under the traditional functionalist school within the managerialist perspective and is essentially based on the principles of human capital theory. The issues of social justice, power, diversity and equity are rare in Arab HRD literature. Although the Arab view of HRD has been influenced by the American school, it is still in an early stage of growth, lacks a clear disposition and is still confined within the stance of traditional training.

## Keywords

career development, human resource development,  
organizational development, training

## JEL Classification

M50, M53, M59

## INTRODUCTION

HRD is a pluralistic field, having multiple definitions, perspectives and paradigms (Abdullah, 2009). According to some researchers, these variations could be linked to cultural differences, as culture is assumed to influence both the importance and the roles assigned to HRD (Weir, 2003; Hansen & Lee, 2009). This has led to inconsistencies in the way HRD is defined and perceived amongst nations (McGuire et al., 2001; Brewster & Mayrhofer, 2012). Moreover, it is thought that the level of HRD's maturation also varies among nations (Swanson & Holton, 2001).

Weir (2003) states that although HRD is generally viewed within four main paradigms shaped under a number of cultural and historical models: the Anglo-Saxon, the European, the Japanese, and the Arab, however, the fourth – Arab – is largely ignored.

Therefore, in order to shed light on how HRD is perceived in the Arab world, this study will investigate how HRD is conceptualized, what purposes are attached to HRD and what activities construct HRD in Arab literature. In particular, this study aims, first, to illustrate how HRD is conceptualized, defined and talked about in Arab language literature. Second, the study aims to provide an international audience with a piece of knowledge developed in and about HRD in Arab countries. In this context, G. McLean and L. McLean (2001), in their

journey to define HRD, state that the limited access to non-English language literature creates a serious limitation to HRD literature review. McGuire and Cseh (2006) state that there is a scarcity in the English language literature concerning HRD's historical development outside the USA and the UK. Hamlin and Stewart (2011) conducted a definitional review of HRD and state among their limitations that the definitions used in their study are based on predominantly Western conceptualizations. Later, Ensour and Kharabsheh (2015) who studied training and development (T&D) philosophies and practice in Jordan claimed that the Arab philosophy of HRD and the theoretical base that guide its practices have not received adequate interest.

Therefore, a systematic review of Arab HRD scholarly literature that has been written within the context of Arab countries during the period 1964–2016 in peer-reviewed journals was conducted. The database that includes articles in Arabic language was utilized: EBSCOhost, EBSCO Discovery service and Dar Al Mandumah (link address <http://mandumah.com/>). A total of 1,560 articles were found. Excluded articles include: first, duplicated articles that were found in different databases, second, translated articles, since this study aimed to analyze Arab writers' viewpoints regarding HRD, third, irrelevant articles that focus on different types of development (e.g. education curricula development, development of higher education system, youth development, literacy, military development, natural sustainable development and former prisoners' development). Thereafter, 227 articles were examined based on our research questions. Surprisingly, only 47 articles were found to define and discuss HRD's purpose and role from the viewpoint of Arab writers. Content analysis was utilized to examine how HRD has been written about through identifying, coding and organizing concepts, ideas, and perceptions related to HRD.

## 1. THEORETICAL BASIS

Although HRD has emerged from the mists of the last century, it has not evolved as a unified single concept or as a distinct field of study (Lee, 2013). Instead, HRD have several inter-related dimensions. Therefore, and to simplify the discussion, HRD is going to be studied in terms of its definitions, components and purposes.

The first definition of HRD was presented by Harbison and Myers (1964) as a process aiming to increase the knowledge, the skills and the abilities of all the people in a society. Nadler (1970) defined HRD as a "series of organized activities conducted within a specified time and designed to produce behavioural changes" (p. 3). Following this, several definitions were introduced (e.g., McLagan, 1989; Watkins, 1989; Chalofsky, 1992). Thereafter, Weinberger (1998) conducted a systematic definitional review from US authors' perspectives and concluded that a great deal of overlap was found between the reviewed definitions, since they all encompass themes of learning and performance improvement. In a more recent study conducted by Hamlin and Stewart (2011, p. 210), the intended purposes of HRD were grouped as "improving individual or group effectiveness and performance";

"improving organizational effectiveness and performance"; "developing knowledge, skills and competencies"; and "enhancing human potential and personal growth", respectively.

Regarding HRD components, it is commonly agreed that HRD has an evolving nature (Sambrook, 1998; McGuire, O'Donnell, Garavan, & Murphy, 2001; Swanson & Holton, 2001; Abdullah, 2009; Lee, 2013). It has been argued that training and development's (T&D's) nature has changed to become HRD (Sambrook, 1998; Swanson & Holton, 2001; Abdullah, 2009). McGuire and Cseh (2006) claim that HRD encompasses workplace learning, T&D, and employee development. Sambrook (1998) illustrate four components for HRD: organizational development (OD), management development (MD), self development (SD) and employee development (ED), which encompasses traditional T&D. Hill (2002) identified three components of HRD as being T&D, organizational behavior and OD.

Further, HRD has been viewed according to various paradigms and purposes, Swanson and Holton (2001) divide HRD into two paradigms: learning and performance. McGuire et al. (2001) introduced three main perspectives of HRD, en-

compassing five philosophies: social constructionism perspective, which includes systemic holism, Managerialist perspective, which covers traditional functionalism, developmental humanism and utilitarian instrumentalism, and critical theory perspective, which represents Marxism theory. McGuire et al. (2001) added that the systemic holism philosophy of HRD is common to both the US and European schools. Conversely, the US school represents the managerialist and unitarist focus, while the European school of HRD represents a more social constructionist and critical theory in HRD. In this context, Lee (2013) states that the focus on performance arose with the scientific view of management in the US. Fenwick (2005) criticizes the overemphasis on organizational performance and prioritizing shareholders' gain, advocating the need to transform workplaces and HRD practice toward fairness, integrity, justice, and equity.

Therefore, efforts have been made to study HRD's definitions, construct and purposes. However, those efforts reflect, in general, the US and European schools, which leads us to ask: how HRD is conceptualized in the Arab literature? what are the purposes of HRD initiatives from the Arab viewpoints? and what constitutes HRD from the Arab viewpoints?

## 2. RESULTS

Linguistically, development in Arabic means 'growing', 'increasing', and 'reforming' (Aljahory, 2016; Jowder, 2006). Human resources are defined as all people who occupy different places in an organization and work to achieve an organization's goals (Hakeem, 2009).

The term HRD has recently emerged in the Arab literature. In the last decades, there has been disagreement concerning the terminology. For example Al-Anani (1965) uses the term "human resource power". Although Farraj (1972) uses the term HRD, the article is targeted at studying literacy and the general education system. Morsi (1981) uses the term "human wealth development"; "vocational education" is utilized by Falouqi (1984). Later, Al-Sabagh (1988) uses the term "workforce development"; Askar (1995)

utilizes the term "human element development"; Al-Asar (1997) uses the term "human potential development". The term "human element development" was utilized again in the Ministry of Tourism's report in 1998 and "human capital development" was utilized by Arabawi (1997). However, the use of the HRD term was not agreed upon until the last decade.

Regarding HRD definitions, over half of HRD definitions embrace the term 'training' in defining HRD. Although Ben-Omir (1985) claims that HRD includes the concept of training, HRD is a broader concept than training to include the effectiveness of individuals not only as trained agents, but also as interacting members with the community and adaptive to their environment. Parak (2014) states that HRD is based on one substantial foundation, which is training. Sa'adat (2010) states that HRD embraces different types of training. Abdel Hai (2011) argues that although education is the main stream of HRD, training has taken on an important role in HRD. Badran (2010) argues that if HR development is the ultimate purpose, training is the basic means to achieve this purpose. Training is defined as administrative and organizational efforts aimed at improving individuals' ability to perform a particular job or specific role in the organization (Heim, 2011).

Education was utilized, but to a lesser extent to identify HRD, in 18 articles. For example, Batool (2014) states that education and good training help to raise the efficiency and professional experience of the HR. Batool (2014) explains that there is a difference between education and training. Training leads to deepening individuals' specialized, work-related and functional knowledge and skills needed to accomplish a specific job, whereas education increases and deepens general knowledge and awareness. Ammar and Sabah (2011) state that educational, technical and vocational training represent a crucial element of HRD. Sabti (2014) claims that HRD involves four dimensions: education, training, technical tools that qualify individuals and refine their abilities mentally and manually, and finally, behavioral means to reshape individuals' behavior and give them the opportunity to reconsider their behavior in their work and in relations with colleagues, supervisors and subordinates.

As a third pattern, learning is utilized to define HRD and this was mentioned in 15 articles. For example, Arabawi (1997) states that learning is an essential means in the formation, preparation and development of HR. Bu-Talb (2015) states that HRD is done through training and planned learning to bring about a change in employee behavior.

Although there have been some agreements in defining HRD (training, education and learning), the routes have not been completely agreed upon. Different methods and techniques have been proposed like programs (Salem, 2002), tools (Al-Rashidi, 2012) and various activities (Belkhiri, 2015). Saba'an (2015) states that HRD encompasses all organizational policies and practices, although the kinds of these practices have not been identified. Jowder (2006) uses the vague term ways, stating "...in scientific, rational, planned, controlled and targeted ways". Salem (2002) argues that HRD includes all professional development program, scientific events, consultations, membership of professional associations, reading in the field of specialization, writing, periodic meetings of employees and scientific visits.

Regarding HRD construct, it was found that improving "functional capabilities" and performance was mentioned in 39 articles (e.g., Salem, 2002; Dawood, 2009; Heim, 2011; Al-Rashidi, 2012; Qudeh, 2013; Parak, 2014; Sonbul, Shalabi, Hakim, & Fares, 2014; Krimeens, Abdul Rahman, & Tadrus, 2014; Bu-Talb, 2015) and, therefore, constitutes the basic theme.

This is perceived to be done through enhancing "individuals' job-related skills and knowledge", which is mentioned in 35 articles (e.g., Salem, 2002; Sa'adat, 2010; Al-Rashidi, 2012; Parak, 2014; Bu-Talb, 2015; Aljahory, 2016) and constitutes the second basic theme. As the focus is on individuals' job-related skills and competencies, therefore, ED constitutes a basic pattern.

Although some HRD definitions encompass CD (e.g., Askar, 1995; Parak, 2014), which focuses on individuals' career progress within and between organizations, most of the definitions agreed on the importance of improving workers' skills and abilities, but with a focus on job-related skills, prioritizing current functional abilities. Similarly,

OD is mentioned as a minor theme (e.g., Qudeh, 2013; Parak, 2014). Thus, CD and OD did not show as common themes.

Regarding HRD purpose in Arab literature, and as mentioned earlier, the perceived purpose of HRD is to improve employees' "functional capabilities" and performance. This perspective is manifested in Heim's (2011) claim that the speculation regarding HRD, whether it is direct, indirect or implicitly illustrated, ultimately is all nothing more than programs for the advancement of staff's professional level. This idea has been illustrated several times, for instance: "improve their functional performance" (Salem, 2002); "growth and improvement of performance and production" (Jowder, 2006); "...improve workforce's technical and administrative competencies" (Sa'adat, 2010); "...to the maximum possible professional and functional efficiency" (Heim, 2011); "...increase their abilities, capacities, competencies, professionalism" (Al-Rashidi, 2012); "...achieve functional improvement" (Parak, 2014); "continuous development of the person's ability to meet the requirements of his/her professional role, to ensure that they perform their duties with high efficiency....." (Bu-Talb, 2015); "..to maximize the potential of its human resources" (Belkhiri, 2015); "maximization of exploitation of workers' abilities and potentials" (Saba'an, 2015); ".....increase his/her working abilities" (Aljahory, 2016).

Improving organizational effectiveness and performance are perceived to be the third theme, as this was mentioned in 19 articles. In this context, Shareif and Yousef (2015) argue that HRD aims to optimize the use of the human element and raise its efficiency and capabilities, since organizations' efficiency and effectiveness depend on the human element. They add that modern management focuses on how to invest in this resource, which is believed to generate additional gain for organizations. Similarly, Dawood (2009) claims that human abilities are a determinant of productive efficiency. This basically represents the idea proposed in human capital theory, which views people as capital.

However, this contradicts the critical perspective presented in some Western literature, which refuses the emphasis on organizational gain. Instead, it seeks a transformation of workplaces and HR



practices to promote human-level interests of justice, fairness and equity (Fenwick, 2005). However, a minor theme was found to focus on improving human potential and personal growth. This idea was mentioned in 7 articles (Ali, 2001; Jowder, 2006; Afandi, 2009; Sa'adat, 2010; Al-Rashidi, 2012; Sabti, 2014; Jafar, 2016). Similarly, Afandi (2009) presents a definition of human development from the Islamic concept as a method aimed at achieving human dignity. However, Jafar (2016) stresses the need to distinguish between the term 'human development' and HRD, where she states that human development is concerned with issues like wellbeing, dignity, health, freedom and equal opportunities, whereas HRD is an administrative perspective concerning organizations, work, and workforce.

Other purposes of HRD have been presented such as coping with technological and environmental changes, which was mentioned in seven articles (Salem, 2002; Jowder, 2006; Dawood, 2009; Parak, 2014; Belkhiri, 2015; Bu-Talb, 2015; Badran, 2010). Improving societies was mentioned twice (Shaheen, 2010; Sa'adat, 2010). Generating employee satisfaction and loyalty was mentioned in two articles (Shareif & Yousef, 2015; Badran, 2010). Enhancing creativity is mentioned once (Jowder, 2006) and enhancing national security was also mentioned once (Shareif & Yousef, 2015). Preventing the abuse of workers was mentioned once (Shareif & Yousef, 2015). These, however, do not constitute basic themes.

### 3. DISCUSSION

The term HRD has recently entered the Arab literature and it has been identified using basically the terms training, education and learning. This perspective is partially supported by some Western views. L. Nadler and Z. Nadler (1989) claim that T&D and HRD interventions are able to improve the individuals' performance, whereas Grieves and Redman (1999) state that HRD's philosophy aims to promote training position from being isolated and conducted as an ad hoc courses to become an everyday learning experience. Sambrook (2004) states that academics introduced HRD term to distinguish strategic and business-oriented learning from traditional T&D, where the focus and the purpose of HRD is more than merely training.

HRD in Arab literature has been perceived through the perspective of ED. HRD is assumed to focus on "individuals" targeted toward "job-related skills and competencies", with the intended purpose of improving workforce "functional abilities" and performance.

Viewing HRD basically from the perspective of ED and viewing OD as a very minor component of HRD is not very compatible with US and European perspectives of HRD. OD was agreed upon to be a construct of HRD in western literature (McLagan, 1989; Watkins, 1989; Sambrook, 1998; Swanson & Holton, 2001; Hill, 2002; Hamlin & Stewart, 2011; Tomé, 2011). Moreover, Hamlin and Stewart (2011) state that HRD and OD's main logic, goals and processes are almost the same. Swanson and Holton (2001) argue that although the activities targeted toward OD is generally smaller than T&D in HRD interventions, yet OD has a larger and more systematic influence on the organization.

Furthermore, in Western literature, CD has been perceived to be a construct of HRD (e.g., Watkins, 1989; McLagan, 1989; Marsick & Watkins, 1994), as for MD (e.g., Sambrook, 1998; Swanson & Holton, 2001). However, CD and MD have not received sufficient interest in the Arab HRD literature.

This is not to say that there are no areas of concordance, where ED – which is concerned basically with employees' T&D (Sambrook, 1998) – was found to be the basic construct of HRD in Arab literature. This partially matches the views of Western literature, where T&D is perceived to be a major construct of HRD (e.g., McLagan, 1989; Watkins, 1989; Sambrook, 1998; Swanson & Holton, 2001; Hill, 2002). As mentioned earlier, Swanson and Holton (2001) claim that T&D compromised the largest part of HRD activities.

Arab HRD discourse is employee-focused and function-performance with organizational performance improvements as the ultimate purpose. This function-performance view of HRD is closely related to the performance paradigm proposed in Western literature (Swanson & Holton, 2001; Stewart et al., 2011). Swanson and Holton (2001) state that the "performance paradigm of HRD holds that the purpose is to advance the mission of the performance system that sponsors

the HRD efforts by improving the capabilities of the individuals working in the system” (p. 137). Weinberger (1998) states that the performance improvement theme keeps emerging from the HRD definitions as a fundamental theory of HRD from a US perspective.

Thus, HRD’s foremost role was assumed to be to enable individuals for the advantage of maximizing organizational performance. This is quite a utilitarian viewpoint of HRD that considers HRD’s initiatives as instrumental, and tries to justify the utility of learning in terms of organizational economic gains. Similarly, the utilitarian outlook is quite common in US-HRD literature, whereas the European school adopts a more humanist outlook (McGuire et al., 2001).

Another angle of similarity with the American school is the “outcome focused” nature of HRD, whereas the European school is perceived to be more “process” focused (McGuire et al., 2001). The “unitarist” perspective could be claimed to be another area of likeness with the US school. McGuire et al. (2001) claim that the unitarist perspective is clearly evident in the US definitions of HRD and HRM. It stress the idea of improving an individual’s potentials not only to achieve individual and group efficiencies, but also as a requirement of achieving organizational results and economic gain through higher levels of employee involvement. Generally, this reflects the managerialist perspective, which focuses on maximizing employees’ performance in achieving organizational objectives (McGuire et al., 2001).

Overall, HRD in the Arab literature falls under the managerialist perspective and is essentially based on the principles of human capital theory (HCT). The notion of human capital is that individuals have knowledge, skills and experience, and thus have economic value for organizations (Weinberger, 1998). Nafukho, Hairston, and Brooks (2004) try to show the link between HRD and HCT and explain how investment in training and education is a form of capital required for individuals, organizations and societies’ development. They add that definitions of HCT demonstrate changes at three levels: improved performance at individual level, improved productivity and profitability at organizational level and returns that benefit the community at societal level.

Lee (2013) states that the focus on performance arose with the scientific view of management in the US, and is founded on HCT, in which people are seen as an organizational resource and the role of HRD is to train and develop them in order to maximize performance, productivity and profitability. This perspective is very close to the way HRD has been talked about in the Arab literature. As discussed above, training, education and learning are perceived to construct HRD. This kind of investment in HR has an intended purpose of improving individuals’ performance and their “functional capabilities”, which are assumed to improve organizational effectiveness and performance. This reflects the idea of HCT. However, the HRD literature almost ignores the improvement at the societal level.

Viewing people as capital is demonstrated in many phrases. Hakeem (2009), for example, states “The optimal use of the organizational human element; which is considered the most valuable resource and the most influential in productivity”. Bu-Khemkm (2009) suggests that HRD contributes in the formulation of human capital in a way that enhances organizations’ performance. Hussain (2010) argues that “...any payments made should result in the development of human resources”. Sonbul et al. (2014) state that HR is at the forefront of the resources needed by organizations to achieve organizational goals and can earn the organization a competitive advantage. Shareif and Yousef (2015) claim that “HR are considered the main support for organization and economic development”. Finally, Bu-Talb (2015) argues that modern HRD is based on a belief that humans have potential and mental capacity exceeding what has been exploited or benefited from in the workplace.

Thus, the main ideas of HRD in the Arab literature and HCT converge in many ways: first, both economically justify the gain from deliberate investing in people. Second, both focus on individual development, which results in organizational benefit. Therefore, HRD in the Arab literature is based largely on the idea of HCT. Similarly, Holton and Naquin (2002) argue that HCT disputes that investing in workers improves their productivity.

Finally, Table 1 summarizes how HRD is perceived in Arab literature.

**Table 1.** HRD in Arab writing

Dimension	Arab perspectives of HRD
HRD activities	Training, education and learning, respectively
Focus	Individuals
Target	Job related skills and competencies
Intended purpose	Improving functional abilities
Paradigm	Performance-oriented
Perspective	Managerialist
Theoretical base	Human capital theory

## CONCLUSION

HRD in the Arab literature is still at a very early stage of growth, holding a narrow and straightforward performance perspective, and it lacks a clear disposition, which means it is still confined within the viewpoint of traditional training activities.

The HRD-performance linkage is quite obvious in the Arab literature. The role of HRD is perceived to be “instrumental” and “outcome focused” toward function-performance improvement and organizational performance, indicating the “utilitarian” outlook of HRD.

Therefore, HRD in Arab literature falls under the traditional functionalist school within the managerialist perspective and is based on the principles of HCT. Issues of social justice, power, diversity and equity are generally absent in Arab HRD literature.

Furthermore, this study found that HRD initiatives are targeted at individuals’ job-related skills. This raises the question regarding the real differences between HRD and T&D in the Arab literature and whether HRD is considered the same as T&D with a different label so as to cope with a Western style. As per the old saying “same man with a different hat”.

Generally, the Arab view of HRD has been influenced mainly by the American performance school. The focus on improving production with little regard for other issues (political, power imbalances, social responsibilities) as viewed from a pluralistic perspective, indicates a need for Arab practitioners to start considering and embracing the multi-faced nature of HRD.

Arab writers should unleash HRD from the crucible they locate it, to realize that HRD could hold different purposes, activities, perspectives and beneficiaries in order to gain the maximum utility of HRD efforts. Overall, the Arab HRD school needs to be open to embrace new perspectives beside the performance-oriented perspective. The learning perspective, however, suggests that it benefits individuals and groups in society as being of equal value and the promotion of social and cultural outcomes as being important as economic returns. These ideas are in pressing need of being embraced in Arab discourse and practices.

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