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Strategic flexibility analysis of HRD research and practice post COVID-19 pandemic

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ABSTRACT
While governments, intergovernmental organizations, non-profits, corporations are all aware that disruptions through pandemics and other natural bio-disasters like the COVID-19 pandemic can happen, barely are we proactive about them. Instead, we are always reactive. In a virtual Town Hall meeting of the Academy of Human Resource Development (AHRD) held on 9 April 2020, on the theme 'How is the pandemic a game-changer for HRD?,' the President of AHRD, Laura Bierema, challenged HRD scholars to determine the possible futures of HRD scholarship post-COVID-19 Pandemic. This article proposes the use of the Strategic Flexibility Framework (SFF) to determine the possible futures of HRD post-COVID-19 pandemic. I first discuss the SFF as a scenario planning and analysis tool. I then developed four scenarios of possible futures for HRD Research and Practice post-COVID-19 pandemic. These scenarios include the 'Meaning of work,' 'Leadership,' 'Contactless Commerce & Education,' and 'Volunteerism.' I conclude by discussing the important opportunities that can serve as intervention points for post-COVID-19 HRD theory, research, and practice.

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Introduction

An outbreak of what is clinically referred to as febrile respiratory illness of unknown cause was first reported in the city of Wuhan in the Hubei province of China in December 2019 (Hui et al. 2020; Tesarik 2020). Subsequently, the causative agent of this respiratory illness was identified as a new type of coronavirus (Tesarik 2020). The virus and the disease it causes have been respectively named Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome Coronavirus-2 (SARS-CoV-2) and Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) (Gorbalenya et al. 2020; Hui et al. 2020). On 11 March 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared COVID-19 as a pandemic as result of the rapid spread of the disease across the world (Tesarik 2020). A series of preventive measures, directed at restraining COVID-19 propagation, have subsequently been taken in most countries. On 22 March 2020, I posted this cryptic message about COVID-19 pandemic on social media which, garnered quite a lot of attention and commentary

> This is the 10th day of being home and not venturing out. The furthest I go is to the backyard to kick some balls with my boys and to the postbox to collect letters. Even

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> collecting letters has become a chore, because my microbiologist wife will not allow me to bring the letters in, unless after I have sprayed with Lysol and allowed it to dry. No matter what happens from now until the scourge of this virus subsides, the world will never be the same. The impact on K-12 & higher education will be enormous. Parents will now question why they should pay residential fees for their kids because they now have a better sense of online education. Several corporations will forgo some real estate, and a lot more people will work from home. Air travel, just like after 9/11, may not be the same again. Our temperatures will be taken, and our nose & mouths may be swapped for instant testing before we board – not farfetched. Ideological stances will shift. Discussion about the free flow of persons, migrants, refugees, and uncontrolled borders will be discussed differently. This morning, sitting and looking out from my window and seeing how desolate the I-95/90 Corridor has become, one of the world's busiest highways, set me thinking, that this "thing" is not a joke & that the world is in reset. (Robert M Yawson 2020)

This message forms the basis of these perspectives. While governments, intergovernmental organizations, non-profits, corporations are all aware that disruptions through pandemics and other natural bio-disasters like the COVID-19 pandemic can happen, barely are we proactive about them. Instead, we are always reactive. This is not for lack of scholarly work on the anticipation of occurrences like this; it is due to the wicked problem of academic and scholarly publications idling in journals, and government-sponsored reports sitting on the shelves.

In a vision document prepared for the State of Minnesota, of which I was a co-author, we developed possible futures of disruption of Minnesota's Food Industry using the Strategic Flexibility Framework (SFF). One of the scenarios of the possible futures we developed is on global pandemics, and we stated thus 'Despite national and international disease control arrangements, outbreaks of epidemic diseases have become increasingly frequent in certain regions. Weaknesses of disease surveillance systems and the inability to control major diseases at their source may allow their spread across geographical borders' (Malik, Yawson, and Hensel 2009b, 51). In that scenario, which we labelled 'Death by Association – Regional Pandemic,' we stated that 'Questions arise regarding possible linkages between climate change and the pandemic. This scenario highlights the importance of international collaboration, research, and development expertise in tracing and containing the pandemic, deciphering the source and transmission mechanism, product development capacity, and manufacturing and supply chain infrastructure to mass-produce and deliver vaccines' (Malik, Yawson, and Hensel 2009b). It has been ten years since this was written, and the scenario developed, but it is eerily similar to what is being written now due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Drawing from the SFF, this article proposes how we can use the Strategic Flexibility Analysis to determine the possible futures of Human Resource Development (HRD) research and practice post-COVID-19 pandemic. I first discuss the SFA as a scenario planning and analysis tool. I then identify four areas within the HRD function and develop possible scenarios post COVID-19 pandemic. I discuss the importance of this exercise and its implication for theory, research, and practice of HRD.

The COVID-19 pandemic is a game-changer for HRD Research and Practice (AHRD COVID-19 Town Hall 2020). Undoubtedly, the pandemic and its attendant mitigation and reactive policies all over the globe will impact HRD research and practice, and we need to be able to forecast its effects (Yawson and Greiman 2017). To produce such forecasts, 'HRD needs to become more predictive – to develop the ability to understand

how human capital systems and organizations will behave' post-COVID-19 pandemic (Yawson and Greiman 2017, 184). A disruption of this scale brought about by the pandemic is creating a sporadic shift in the proclivities and expectations of individuals as citizens, as employees, and as consumers (Sneader and Singhal 2020). Our way of life, how we work, and how we use technology will be impacted in very significant ways (Sneader and Singhal 2020), and these create new challenges for HRD theory, research, and practice. The uncertainty that is associated with post-COVID-19 future requires strategic flexibility, the ability to change strategies, and become more adaptable.

Strategic flexibility analysis

Strategic Flexibility is the capability to respond to a dynamic environment through continuous changes and systemic actions (Yawson and Greiman 2016). Sanchez (1997) defines strategic flexibility as 'the condition of having strategic options that are created through the combined effects of an organization's coordination flexibility in acquiring and using flexible resources' (72). Strategic flexibility started as a new management approach for organizations as a counterfactual to the traditional strategic management objective of choosing a single 'best' plan of action. The realization that selecting a single best plan of action is likely to be an unrealistic objective in an uncertain environment, established strategic flexibility as a core management concept. Several studies have emphasized the effectiveness of strategic flexibility in the context of environmental dynamism and uncertainties like we are currently facing with the COVID-19 pandemic (Brozovic 2018; Nadkarni and Herrmann 2010; Sanchez 1995; Stieglitz, Knudsen, and Becker 2016). Sanchez (1995) argues that firms can enhance their competitiveness in dynamic environments by applying strategic flexibility to form alternative courses of action or strategic options. Therefore, the HRD research and practice community can apply strategic flexibility to determine the possible futures of HRD research and practice post-COVID-19 pandemic.

While it was developed as a management concept, its use became broadened not just for organizations, but as a broader scenario analysis tool for planning in an uncertain environment generally and what has become known as Strategic Flexibility Analysis (SFA). SFA is a four-step framework, which was first developed by Michael Raynor (Raynor 2007). The implementation steps are Anticipation, Accumulation, Formulation, and Operation. The following description of the steps is drawn substantially from (Malik, Yawson, and Hensel 2009b; Yawson and Greiman 2017) and tailored to the post-COVID -19 HRD functions, research, and practice.

Anticipate – The process should begin by defining the drivers that will shape the post-COVID-19 HRD. Once these drivers are understood, the next step is to develop scenarios that provide 'stories' about possible future realities (Malik, Yawson, and Hensel 2009a, 2009b; Yawson and Greiman 2017). These scenarios are statements of how COVID-19 pandemic and its aftermath could shape our way of life, how we work, and how we use technology and the logical consequence for how HRD research and practice should adapt.

Formulate – For any given scenario, this step determines the strategies for success under different conditions. What type of research needs to be conducted? How should such research be approached to fit into the next normal post-COVID-19 pandemic?

Which HRD functions need to be prioritized? Each scenario has an optimal strategy. Each optimal strategy consists of various constituent elements – technologies, capabilities, and assets – required to execute the strategy. Features common to many optimal strategies (one derived from each scenario) are core elements; those common to a few or one optimal strategy are called contingent elements (Malik, Yawson, and Hensel 2009a, 2009b; Yawson and Greiman 2017).

Accumulate – Core elements have little strategic risk because they are part of the optimal strategies for multiple scenarios. Contingent elements require an options-based approach, which gives choices for allocating resources. In the accumulation phase, the decision-maker commits to core elements and takes options on contingent factors. Which research areas should HRD scholars focus their attention?

Operate – This step involves monitoring the environment to determine which scenario accurately captures the most critical elements of the post-COVID-19 future. This consists of choosing the most appropriate optimal strategy, determining the necessary contingent elements, and deciding which options to exercise or abandon. The set of scenarios must be reviewed and, if needed, refreshed, or redeveloped.

Scenarios for possible futures of HRD research and practice

COVID-19 and the associated reactionary problem-solving mechanisms that have been put in place and continue to be put in place are what will drive HRD research and practice in the next normal. In anticipation, I have developed four scenarios of possible futures for HRD Research and Practice post-COVID-19 pandemic. These scenarios include the 'Meaning of work,' 'Leadership,' 'Contactless Commerce & Education,' and 'Volunteerism.' These scenarios are statements of how the COVID-19 pandemic could shape some critical HRD functions and the logical consequence for new HRD research and practice requirements. Each scenario attempts to identify the extreme limits of the drivers of the possible future. This step is important because the insights gained by the process provides guidance to HRD research and practice community to define the degree of flexibility in designing the necessary research protocols, curriculum, and workforce and organization development programmes. The four scenarios discussed in this study are not exhaustive, and several other scenarios can be developed.

Shifts at scale and the meaning of work

This scenario is predicated on the knowledge that HRD professionals are vital to helping people and organizations navigate workforce shifts en masse through agile workforce strategies. HRD expertise is critical in keeping the global economy viable and helping employees and their families survive.

The post-pandemic world will see workforce shifts and the need for rapid reskilling. There will be a need for new skills for the 'distance economy.' Remote working was on ascendancy before COVID-19, and a possible post-pandemic scenario of fully established telecommuting society necessitates the re-orientation of HRD research and practice. COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated the levels of digitization to help reduce avoidable physical interactions resulting in new ways to reinvent work, and the way workers perform them.

The meaning of work will not be the same. Evolving terminologies, taxonomies, and practices as a result of the pandemic will define the next normal workplace, e.g. Differentiation of essential and non-essential workers; De-densification of workspaces. Organizations will face the challenge of managers figuring out how to lead their teams virtually. Organizations will have to determine new ways of building social capital and social networking and 'how to maintain cohesion without the benefit of informal coffee, lunch, or corridor chats' (Agrawal et al. 2020, 2). Employee engagement will not be the same, as we will need different means of engaging the remote workforce. The future of work, driven by the use of more automation and technology in what has been described as the 'Fourth Industrial Revolution,' was always coming. COVID-19 has hastened the pace.

Organizational leadership and the next normal

This scenario is based on the assumption that in the face of uncertainty, employees expect leaders to help them gain clarity and an assurance of hope for a better future. Leadership in a crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic is a huge responsibility, with its attendant privileges. The next normal post-COVID-19 will see more demands on leaders and how leaders take care of themselves and the people and organizations they lead. More leadership theories will evolve, and the demand for effective theory to practice will expand.

In a crisis, many leaders tend not to recognize wicked problems and thus react to these wicked problems with quick fixes, or overly simplistic solutions, often as part of the command-and-control leadership approach most leaders default to during a crisis (Yawson 2015). The pandemic is challenging the leaders of companies and organizations in every sector around the globe. Its consequences will demand new leadership approaches and present more significant difficulties than anyone anticipates (D'Auria and De Smet 2020). In a possible post-COVID-19 scenario, unintended consequences of these actions will plague organizations with leaders unable to practice integrative awareness, guided by their fear and resort to habitual responses, often unconsciously biased, to unfamiliar problems (Brassey and Kruyt 2020).

Contactless commerce & education

The Covid-19 lockdowns have led a transformation in the way we run our schools, interact with loved ones, teach and learn, do our work, do our shopping, travel, get medical care, spend leisure time, engage in commerce, and conduct many of the routine transactions of life (Sneader and Sternfels 2020). These changes have fast-tracked the exodus to digital technologies on a scale never seen before at an astonishing speed, across every sector. These sociotechnical changes will be the next normal. Sociotechnical theory explains that a successful work system requires the simultaneous configuration of three factors: people, technology, and tasks. It will, therefore, be necessary for organizations, including educational institutions (K-12 and higher education) to create a flexible learning process that enables them to configure and allocate resources and capabilities to fully utilize technological factors for achieving tasks in order to adapt to the dynamic environment of the post-COVID-19 era. Digital transformation will no longer be a cliché but a reality in many cases – and a necessity for all (Singhal and Sneader 2020).

I am my neighbours keeper – employee and corporate volunteerism

One of the most significant enlightenment as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic is the evolution of individual and corporate volunteerism. Companies are using their resources voluntarily to fight against the pandemic. Small businesses and individuals are producing Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) for healthcare workers. While the pandemic has brought volunteerism into the forefront of daily discussion, individual and corporate volunteerism has been part of American life for centuries. In discussing the concept of volunteerism from a more general perspective, Wilson (2000) described volunteering as the undertaking of any activity in which an employee or organization freely performs a needed service free of charge to another person, group, organization or offers free time for a cause without the expectation of any financial or material reward. Such a free offer of time or service can be either individual or collective and involves the development of collective capacities (Do Paço, Agostinho, and Nave 2013). Post-COVID-19 normal will see more business case and societal demands for more corporate volunteerism.

Promoting employee volunteerism is an HRD strategy (Mozes, Josman, and Yaniv 2011). Volunteering, like any other long-term process in life, is a dynamic process (Omoto and Snyder 1995). The variables which are influencing volunteerism during the pandemic may not necessarily be those that be will drive volunteerism in the next normal of post-COVID-19 (Chacón, Vecina, and Dávila 2007). Sometimes, the experience of volunteering is so intense that it modifies volunteers' initial motivations, their support networks, their self-concept, and so on (Gray and Stevenson 2019). Since this scenario sees an increase in volunteerism post-COVID-19, it is essential to understand the volunteers' motivations because it will allow organizations to make the necessary adjustments to their different profiles and motivations, bringing benefits to both involved parts. The C-Suite level in several organizations will get involved in the recruitment and retention of volunteers increasingly.

Implications and recommendations for theory, research, and practice

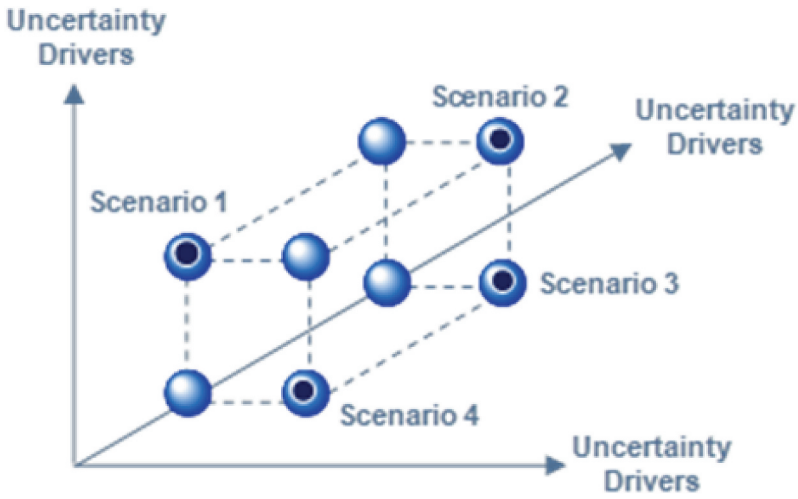
Institutions that reinvent and position themselves to make the most of better insight and foresight through strategic flexibility, as preferences evolve, will disproportionally succeed (Sneader and Singhal 2020). It behoves on leading associations and academic and professional societies and associations, like AHRD and UFHRD, and HRD related research departments across the globe, to be at the forefront of determining these possible HRD futures. As I stated in my social media post I quoted in the introduction to this perspective, the world as we know it will not be the same post-COVID 19 pandemic. In this article, I have applied a more constrained execution of the Strategic Flexibility Framework to determine HRD functions-specific scenarios to plan for the possible futures of HRD research and practice. Specific entities within the HRD community of practice and research can build on these analyses and create initiatives and strategies. For example, an HRD industry decision-maker can use the process to reconfigure an in-house strategic employee training and development investment portfolio. Similarly, an HRD department at any university can use the framework to reconfigure its research funding portfolio and more firmly determine which core aspects of the curriculum investments should be made, including the type of faculty to be hired. Likewise,

HRD professionals in a state government can use the framework to create new human capital development initiatives. They can identify core human capital and capacity building needs that require investments, including funding for specific actions in public universities or reimagining of K-12 curriculum to serve the needs of the future.

Constrained HRD functions-specific application of the SFF

As I mentioned earlier, the four scenarios are not exhaustive, but they are possible futures that affect HRD research and practice. They also serve as an example of the application of the Strategic Flexibility Framework.

(1) *Anticipate – Create scenarios*: The first step in applying the SFF was to define the drivers that will shape HRD and to create scenarios for the relevant range of strategic uncertainty. The drivers, in this case, are the COVID-19 pandemic and the series of preventive measures directed at restraining its propagation and mitigate its adverse impact. Scenarios that represent possible futures based on these drivers are then developed, as done with the four scenarios in this paper. Figure 1 is a graphical representation of the uncertainty drivers and the four scenarios.
(2) *Formulate – Determine Strategies*: For any given scenario, this step determines the strategies for success. Table 1 describes key strategic HRD research themes for each of the four scenarios. These themes are not exhaustive but critical for the post-COVID-19 HRD research.
(3) *Accumulate*: What capabilities do we as HRD community need to implement the core strategies identified in the formulate phase? We need to broaden our scope and avoid narrow and exclusionary research agenda. Curriculum changes will need to occur. How we run our conferences may have to change. More attention



Adapted from Yawson (2017)

Figure 1. Uncertainty drivers and creation of scenarios.

Table 1. Strategic HRD research themes.

Scenarios	Strategic HRD Research Themes
Shifts at Scale and the Meaning of Work	• Designing for agility, focusing on impact and the growth of flexibility and its implications for workers (for example, the shift from full time to part time, 'essential' workers and the growing divide between men and women) • Redefining talent as a result of the changing meaning and faces of careers • Learning and developing for a lifetime – co-evolution and learning experiences in the era of new workspaces • Deploying talent, mobilizing careers – experiences in new work platforms and complex projects • Embracing modern workspaces and collaboration, new models of work and working (such as job sharing, and reduced workload arrangements from non-managerial to managerial employees • Designing for sharing and security • Prioritizing digital transformation, increasing connectivity, digitalization and the impact on workers as well as jobs • Unleashing Automation, Analytics, Algorithms and Artificial Intelligence
Organizational Leadership and the Next Normal	• Leading virtual teams • Effective crisis leadership • Leadership in uncertain times • Wicked Problems • Sense making • Social Inclusion, diversity, and equity • Leading the digital organization • Leading Educational Institutions
Contactless Commerce & Education	• Digital Transformation • Contactless commerce and social exclusion • Remote Learning • The new learning organization • The psychodynamics of remote working • Performance Management of remote employees
I am my Neighbours Keeper – Employee and Corporate Volunteerism	• HRD curriculum on volunteerism • Managing volunteers in an organization • Corporate social responsibility and employee volunteering • Training and development of volunteers • Integration of volunteers into the organization as human resource • Corporate volunteerism • Motivations, barriers, and benefits associated with volunteering • Managing the tensions between volunteers and paid staff • Organizing volunteer involvement in the organization • Volunteerism as an HRD function • Community Engagement

will have to be paid to the mentoring of our graduate students as a community. Our main professional societies, like the AHRD and UFHRD, have the opportunity to facilitate the building of these strategic capabilities by commissioning the production of state-of-the-art reports on recent research developments and on curriculum, assessment, and accreditation methods; enhancing and reimagining personal interactions; building partnerships and collaborations among other academic and professional societies; publishing special editions of trending and trendsetting issues in journals; redefining, defining and promoting mutual understanding of emerging taxonomies as a result of the pandemic; and promoting mutual understanding of emerging methods, languages, and cultures (Institute of Medicine 2005). Some of these capabilities already exist; however, there is the need

for more coordinated and deliberate effort to be more predictive and strategically flexible.

(4) *Operate*: As we step into the next normal, the HRD research and practice communities will have to monitor the environment to determine which scenario accurately captures the essential elements of the future (Yawson and Greiman 2017). This involves choosing the most appropriate research strategies, continually determining the shifting needs of organizations, employees, and decision-makers and deciding which options to pursue or abandon. The set of scenarios, as discussed in this paper and any others that the HRD research community may develop must be reviewed and, if needed, refreshed, or redeveloped.

Intervention points for post-COVID-19 HRD theory, research, and practice

The world of work and the meaning of work will not be the same. The online world of contactless commerce, work, and education could be boosted in ways that reshape teaching and learning, and consumer and employee behaviour forever (Sneader and Singhal 2020). The intersection of the demands of the fourth industrial revolution and the meta forces of COVID-19 drives the necessity for organizations to restructure for flexibility, and HRD research must focus on supporting organizations' attempts to understand what is necessary to retain employees. Employee engagement in the era of 'social distancing' will need to be researched differently.

The evolution of new taxonomies like 'essential' and 'non-essential' workers, 'front-line' employees, 'de-densified' workspaces, 'hyflex' education approach, are creating research themes and emergent research questions. How should HRD and HR functions adapt and define these new taxonomies? How will such employee and labour categorizations affect employee motivation? Volunteerism, private-public partnerships, human rights, and several other HRD functions which, are severely under-represented in HRD scholarship have been bolstered as the result of the pandemic and can no longer be sidelined in HRD research. To ensure all these are put in the right perspective for HRD research to be relevant, there is the need for a Strategic Flexibility Analysis, as has been illustrated in this article.

HRD community will need to refocus on how we research and understand the learning organizations and organizational learning. Organizations will need to accelerate digital training programs and create 'an ecosystem of learning partners to produce and deliver digital content rapidly to a broad base of employees' (Agrawal et al. 2020, 3). HRD research and practice will be critical in this front. HRD research will need to look at alternative employment models and other job design options to respond rapidly to workforce shifts.

Conclusion

Having laid out all these scenarios, significant transformations, and disruption anticipated post-COVID-19 pandemic, and the need for swift action, we must also, as HRD professionals, guard against our voluntary and involuntary effects that may facilitate in bringing about social exclusion, even a temporary one. That is why I am not comfortable

with the term 'social distancing.' I prefer 'physical distancing' as it is more accurate and reminds us that we are apart physically, not socially, or emotionally. It also speaks to the need for HRD scholarship to examine and define these emerging taxonomies.

Far from misjudging the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on our way of life, we should nonetheless avoid the unintended consequences of overacting and recognize the wicked problems associated with it. Pandemics come and go, and there is life after that – the so-called next normal. They leave in their trail, death, pain, and sorrow. There will be life 'after COVID-19′ too, it will not be a new normal, it is the next normal, and we should do our utmost to make it the best possible future for people in urgent need of help. To do so is to make our research more relevant, determine our possible futures, and be adaptable to the next normal brought about by COVID-19. Rapid, iterative, strategic flexibility analysis of potential scenarios can optimize HRD research and make HRD practice even more relevant.

Disclosure statement

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