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Human Resource Development Review 2009; 8; 3 originally published online Feb 15, 2009;
DOI: 10.1177/1534484308330019

The online version of this article can be found at:
http://hrd.sagepub.com/cgi/content/abstract/8/1/3
The Adoption and Diffusion of an NHRD Standard: A Conceptual Framework

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This article proposes a conceptual framework to explain the adoption and diffusion of a national human resource development (NHRD) standard. NHRD standards are used by governments to promote training and development in organizations and increase the professionalization of practices used by organizations. Institutional theory suggests that adoption and diffusion of HRD practices can be explained using a number of institutional concepts such as structural equivalence, social cohesion, and normative and mimetic isomorphism. Social cohesion and structural equivalence create normative and mimetic pressure, which results in increased adoption and diffusion. We highlight other organizational characteristics that explain adoption and diffusion, and also the implications for both theory and research.

Keywords: national human resource development (NHRD) standards; institutional theory; adoption and diffusion

Introduction

Globalization, the emergence of the knowledge economy, and the adoption of new technologies by organizations have brought more focus on the contribution of human resources (HR) to competitiveness and performance. Human resources are increasingly considered to have the potential to provide sustainable competitive advantage (Barney & Wright, 1998; Harrison & Kessels, 2004). An important dimension of HR capability enhancement concerns investment that organizations make in HR development (HRD) or training and development. As organizations and economies seek to grow and compete in a knowledge-based economy, HRD is expected to play a more strategic role in organizations.
Garavan, 2007; Holland, Sheehan, & De Cieri, 2007). National governments are also preoccupied with the level of skill in the labor force and investments in training and development. There are, however, debates concerning who should make the investment—government, employers, or employees. The evidence showing a growing link between investment in bundles of HRD activities and organization and country competitiveness continues to evolve; however, there is still a lot of skepticism about the value of HRD investments.

McLean (2004, p. 269) argues that there is an “emerging emphasis” on defining HRD as a national, well-planned investment that has the potential to enhance the human capital of a country (Keeley, 2007; Smith, 2006) and enable it to meet a range of national economic and social objectives (Luo, 2006). Organizations and countries do, however, encounter difficulties in ensuring that training and development investments and HRD practices are a central part of the corporate and national agendas. Countries such as the United Kingdom, Australia, New Zealand, and Ireland have struggled to bring a level of coherence to national training and development policies and practices. Aspects of training and development in these countries are considered fragmented and frequently focused on basic-level skills rather than on advanced skill development. Training and development is also a frequently ad hoc and cost-driven activity (Hoque, 2003; McKeown & Teicher, 2006; Smith, 2006; Smith, Boocock, Loan-Clarke, & Whittaker, 2002). The social partners in these countries are in agreement concerning the need to invest in training and development; however, the extent of investment is not at the level desired.

National governments use a variety of strategies and policy measures to encourage organizations and individuals to invest in human capital. These include training guarantee schemes, financial incentives for investment in management skills, levy-grant schemes for sectors that do not train, and national training or HR standards (Karpin, 1995; Luo, 2006; Mendel, 2006). National training and development standards are the particular focus of this article. Scott (2008, p. 78) argues that the development of standards and certification processes constitute a clear instance of institutionalized normative and cultural control. Market-related factors, enhanced customer service, greater efficiency, and a kick-start for improvement in training and development are highlighted as the key reasons for national standards and the achievement of accreditation by organizations (Brown & Van Der Wiele, 1997; McAdam & McKeown, 1999). Brunsson and Jacobsson (2000) suggest that national standards act as general advice for prospective adopters. They articulate minimum standards that must be met to receive accreditation from a professional organization. Scott (2008) suggests that accreditation is a primary indicator of legitimacy.

Organizations use HR management (HRM) and development strategies in a recruitment and retention strategy. Given the war for talent and the scarcity of well-qualified HR in the labor market, organizations are focusing on make rather than buy options when it comes to people development. Shortages of
internationally experienced managers are cited as a key issue for newly internationalized firms (Shen & Darby, 2006). Scullion and Collings (2006) highlight that organizations are introducing various mechanisms to address skill shortages. Joo and McLean (2006, p. 234) suggest that organizations seek to be deemed an “employer of choice.” This attribution confers a number of important advantages, including a positive image, greater competitiveness, and a strong signal to prospective employees that the organization is committed to investing in people capability. Accreditation makes that that is essentially internal more visible to the external environment. Certification potentially confers external legitimacy on HRD and training and development practices. It also suggests that the employer is socially responsible and committed to investing in its employees (Grugulis, 2007).

To date, a number of countries have implemented national HR or training and development standards. These include the United Kingdom, Ireland, Singapore, and New Zealand. The United Kingdom launched its standard Investors in People (IIP) in 1991, Ireland launched an Excellence Through People (ETP) standard in 1995, and Singapore launched its People Developer Standard (PDS) in 1997. The U.K. standard has been adopted by more than 20 countries (IIP UK, 2007). Kidger, Jackson-van Veen, and Redfern (2004) argue that the internationalization of the IIP standard highlights a willingness to learn from other countries and the universality of the contribution of training and development practices to organizational performance. Standards can be transferred to different countries; however, there is a requirement for modification to account for national, institutional, and cultural differences.

The adoption and diffusion of national HRD (NHRD) standards within a country depend largely on the actions of individual organizations and their willingness to adopt the standard. Adoption focuses on organizations with certain characteristics, which are receptive to the standard and therefore seek accreditation. Diffusion focuses on understanding how the standard spreads and what characteristics of the standard lead to its widespread acceptance. A small number of organizations may adopt a standard; however, for it to be a value in the national context, it needs to be adopted by a large number of organizations. Standards are more easily diffused than norms. Terlaak (2007), for example, suggests that standards have two characteristics that make their diffusion easier: They are written and they entail accreditation processes. Although these characteristics are acknowledged, there is a significant gap in understanding concerning how NHRD standards are both adopted and diffused. This article addresses this knowledge deficit through the use of concepts derived from institutional theory. We propose a conceptual framework that incorporates institutional processes such as normative and mimetic isomorphism, social cohesion, and structural equivalence to explain both adoption and diffusion. We also explain how over time an NHRD standard may confer legitimacy on organizations who adopt it.
The Theoretical Context

Institutional theory is widely used to explain how organizations and individuals act. Kuchinke (2000, p. 279) has highlighted that it seeks to explain individual action within a collective system. Scott (2008) highlights three pillars of institutions: regulative, normative, and cultural-cognitive. The regulative pillar emphasizes rules that are enforced by a higher authority, such as national governments using legislation, regulations, and national standards. The normative pillar highlights the role of social beliefs, norms, and values, whereas the cultural-cognitive pillar focuses on meaning, which is socially constructed through the interaction of internal interpretation processes within the external cultural environment. Neoinstitutionalism tends to emphasize the cultural-cognitive pillar of institutions, which is considered to be particularly important in explaining diffusion. Regulative and normative influences appear to have greater significance in explaining adoption. Taylor and Parkinson (1998), for example, have suggested that the adoption of the U.K. IIP standard conformed to an S-curve theory. The initial take-up of the standard by organizations was slow, followed by a sharp increase, and then a tapering off. Mendel (2006) has suggested that the diffusion of organizational practices is initially influenced by the institutional and cultural framework within which organizations operate and subsequently through an organization’s position and relationship with other actors.

Institutional theory proposes that an organization’s responsiveness to new business practices and standards is influenced by both technical and institutional factors. Casile and Davis-Blake (2002, p. 180) define technical factors as “key aspects of task environments and of organizations’ technical areas, that are related to economic fitness and include key resources, dependencies and market forces.” Rogers (2003) argues that initially organizations make rational choices to gain technical advantages; however, institutional theorists cast doubt on rational actor explanations. Organizations may make choices not because they are optimal but because they are appropriate. Technical arguments appear to have limited value in explaining the diffusion of HRM practices. HRM practices offer considerable technical benefits; however, they are underused by organizations. Johns (1993) suggests that the institutional argument is important in explaining the low level of adoption of HRM practices. Monahan, Meyer, and Scott (1994) have suggested that although there are many rational reasons for adopting training and development practices, technical benefits alone are insufficient in explaining why they are adopted by a large number of organizations.

Institutional theory takes the view that as an increasing number of organizations adopt a practice, it acquires value beyond its technical characteristics or requirements. Scott, Ruef, Mendel, and Carronna (2000, p. 237) suggest that organizations “need social acceptability and credibility” to survive. They strive for legitimacy, which Suchman (1995, p. 574) defines as “a generalized
perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs and definitions.” This suggests that for an NHRD standard to become legitimate, many organizations need to adopt the standard. Alberga, Tyson, and Parsons (1997) found that a critical factor in enhancing the legitimacy of the U.K. IIP standard was its widespread adoption by organizations.

Isomorphism is central to the explanatory value of institutional theory. Two particular types of isomorphism are of relevance in the context of an NHRD standard: competitive and institutional. Hannan and Freeman (1977) argue that organizations become isomorphic with one another because of rational responses to similar environmental conditions. DiMaggio and Powell (1983), in contrast, emphasize the importance of organizational interconnectivity resulting in isomorphism. They suggest three mechanisms: coercive, normative, and mimetic. Coercive isomorphism comes about through formal and informal pressures being exerted on organizations. Some countries have mandatory rules concerning expenditure on training and the provision of particular types of training—for example, safety training. Coercive forces have limited relevance in explaining the adoption and diffusion of an NHRD standard. Normative and mimetic isomorphisms are likely to have more relevance.

Normative isomorphism highlights the rule of professionalization, which results in organizations becoming more homogeneous. This occurs through the establishment of formal norms and the development of networks. Palmer, Jennings, and Zhou (1993) highlight the role of social contagion whereby proximate organizations use one another as reference points when deciding whether to adopt a particular practice or not. Organizations may be directly linked through social cohesion and indirectly linked through structural equivalence. Social cohesion has particular relevance because it explains why organizations choose practices that are appropriate to their social system (Guler, Guillén, & Macpherson, 2002). Mimetic isomorphism comes about because of uncertainty, as a result of which organizations imitate one another. Drori, Meyer, and Hwang (2006) suggest that organizational archetypes develop over time because they focus on who they should emulate. Mimetic isomorphism also occurs between structurally equivalent organizations. Burt (1987) suggests that structurally equivalent actors are identically positioned in the social structure, and they have similar relations with other parties. Social cohesion and structural equivalence are considered complementary explanations in the diffusion of organizational practices. We now focus on explaining how these theoretical concepts are incorporated into our conceptual framework.

Our Conceptual Framework

Figure 1 outlines our conceptual framework, which proposes that the adoption of an NHRD standard results from the interaction of technical and institutional factors. We initially focus on normative and mimetic isomorphism and
follow this with consideration of the importance of linkages, reference groups, and other attributes of organizations. We then explain the key differences between early and late adopters.

Normative Isomorphic Influences

We have highlighted the importance of isomorphic processes, be they normative or mimetic. Burns and Wholey (1993) highlight the difficulty in differentiating between these two sets of forces. Organizations are influenced by the linkages they have in the wider environment. Oliver (1991, p. 171) argues that “highly interconnected environments provide relational channels through which institutional norms can be diffused.” Our conceptual framework (Figure 1, section 1) depicts important linkages through which an NHRD standard can be diffused normatively via social cohesion.

Perri, Goodwin, Peck, and Freeman (2006) define an interorganizational network as any moderately stable pattern of ties or links between organizations or between organizations and individuals, where those ties represent some form of recognizable accountability (however etiolated and overridden), whether formal or informal in character, whether weak or strong, loose or tight, bounded or unbounded. (p. 5)
The networks that an organization participates in will influence the organizational practices it will adopt. Myriad organizations comprise an organization’s total network. In the context of an NHRD standard, these include employer associations, business associations, Chambers of Commerce, HR professional associations, industry sector bodies, international and national accreditation bodies, NHRD agencies, and trade unions.

The extent to which an organization is embedded in a social context where accreditation is important will explain both the adoption and diffusion of an NHRD standard. In the non-HRD context, research highlights how this context operates. Casile and Davis-Blake (2002) found, for example, that business schools were more likely to seek accreditation if they operated in a social context where accreditation was deemed to be important for their legitimacy. Organizations were more likely to adopt new professional standards if they had close ties to the body setting the standards. Organizations that adopt an NHRD standard are likely to have another external award such as ISO 9000 (Cox & Spires, 2002; O’Connor, 1998; Training & Evaluation Services, 2003).

We therefore suggest the following propositions:

**Proposition 1a:** Organizational participation in interorganizational networks is positively associated with adoption of an NHRD standard.

**Proposition 1b:** The more an organization is embedded in a social context in which accreditation is important, the more likely it is to adopt an NHRD standard.

**Proposition 1c:** The stronger an organization’s links to a national training agency, the more likely it is to adopt an NHRD standard.

Normative and mimetic isomorphisms occur through important linkages and reference groups (Figure 1, section 2). Erickson (1988) found that in conditions of uncertainty, actors seek normative guidance from reference groups via a process of social comparison. Galaskiewicz and Wasserman (1989) found that organizational linkages are also important in determining which organizations will be imitated. Both direct and indirect network ties between boundary-spanning personnel are also important. Organizations mimic actors they trust. Guler et al. (2002) found that social cohesion can contribute to mimetic isomorphism as well as to normative isomorphism.

The diffusion of organizational practices tends to be rapid among the same categories of organizations (Strang & Meyer, 1993). Organizations observe and mimic reference groups such as organizations with whom they are directly tied, those of a similar size, those in the same industrial sector, or those in a particular geographic region (Davis & Greve, 1997; Goodstein, 1994; Guler et al., 2002; Scott, 2008). Hoque (2003) found that independent organizations not part of a group were less likely to adopt IIP in the United Kingdom.

Large organizations provide particularly compelling reference groups for other large and small organizations to imitate (Davis, 1991; Haveman, 1993). The diffusion literature emphasizes the importance of the spatial proximity of
actors in the dissemination of innovations (Strang & Soule, 1998). In examining family-friendly work practices, for example, Goodstein (1994) found that mimetic isomorphism was strongest when organizations were both in the same industrial sector and geographically proximate to each other. Burns and Wholey (1993) attribute diffusion in particular geographic regions to normative forces rather than responses to local competition. If an organization is in frequent contact with other accredited organizations, it is more likely to adopt an NHRD standard, and it is also more likely to retain it.

Imitation occurs between structurally equivalent organizations in the same industry (Figure 1, section 3). Imitation will occur even in the absence of direct contact between organizations. Structural equivalence highlights the role of symbolic communication among competitors. As a practice becomes ubiquitous in an organization’s comparison group, adoption becomes normative irrespective of technical gains (Davis, 1991). We define structurally equivalent industries as those with similar patterns of relations with suppliers and buyers. Members of a particular industry can be seen as more or less structurally equivalent (Davis, 1991, p. 595). In respect of IIP, Hoque (2003) found that diffusion of the standard was highest in the hospitality, utilities, finance, wholesale, and retail-trade sectors. We therefore suggest the following propositions:

**Proposition 2a:** Organization’s ownership ties to accredited organizations are positively associated with the adoption of an NHRD standard.

**Proposition 2b:** Organization’s geographic proximity to accredited organizations is positively associated with the adoption of an NHRD standard.

**Proposition 2c:** NHRD-accredited organizations of a size similar to that of a focal organization influence the focal organization to adopt an NHRD standard.

**Proposition 2d:** A high adoption rate of an NHRD standard by organizations in a particular industrial sector is positively associated with diffusion of an NHRD standard among structurally equivalent organizations in the same industrial sector.

Mimetic isomorphism occurs when organizations considering whether to adopt an NHRD standard look to successful and prestigious reference groups (Figure 1, section 4). Organizations imitate successful and prestigious organizations (Burns & Wholey, 1993; Haveman, 1993; Scott, 2008). The U.K. government, for example, initially targeted large and prestigious organizations to establish the legitimacy of IIP and create a bandwagon effect (Hoque, Taylor, & Bell, 2005). Strang and Meyer (1993) found that organizations observe both their competitors and role models advocated by independent bodies such as the United Nations and the International Labour Organization (2000). These bodies “promote the homogenization of their members around models of progressive policy” (Strang & Meyer, 1993, p. 492). Likewise, the American Society for Training and Development (ASTD) in the United States and the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) in the United Kingdom and Ireland advocate organizational archetypes with exemplary HRD practices to their members (Luo, 2006). Organizations that appear in national *Best Companies*...
lists are perceived to be prestigious. Organizations in the general population imitate their practices. This has significant implications for the diffusion of an NHRD standard because organizations that aspire to be listed as a “best company to work for” are recommended to attain the NHRD standard to improve their HRD systems. We therefore suggest the following propositions:

**Proposition 3a:** Accredited organizations that are perceived to be successful influence other organizations in the general population to adopt an NHRD standard.

**Proposition 3b:** Accredited organizations that are perceived to be prestigious organizations influence other organizations in the general population to adopt an NHRD standard.

**Organizational Characteristics and Characteristics of an Organization's HR System**

We consider the following organizational attributes to be important in explaining the adoption of an NHRD standard: ownership, size, and presence of an HR function; organizational commitment to and top management support for HRD; nature of strategic objectives; the presence of workplace champions for HRD; organization involvement with other standards; and the use of external benchmarking by the HRD function (Figure 1, section 5).

Organizational ownership characteristics are important. Casile and Davis-Blake (2002) found, in the context of adoption, that private sector organizations were more responsive to technical factors, whereas public sector organizations were more responsive to institutional factors. Public sector organizations are quicker to respond to changes in the normative environment than private sector organizations. Private sector organizations focus on efficiency gains, whereas public sector organizations focus on legitimacy issues. Scott (1987, p. 502) argues that public organizations are “not compelled to conform but voluntarily seek out the attention and approval of the authorising agent.” Public sector organizations were more likely to adopt government-supported HR practices, such as grievance procedures, affirmative action, and internal labor market arrangements, than private sector organizations (Dobbin, Edelman, Meyer, Scott, & Swidler, 1988; Dobbin, Sutton, Meyer, & Scott, 1993). Hoque (2003) has suggested, therefore, that public sector organizations are more likely to be IIP accredited than private sector workplaces. The factors determining the adoption of an NHRD standard are, therefore, different for private and public sector organizations. We suggest the following propositions:

**Proposition 4a:** Public sector organizations are more likely to adopt an NHRD standard than private sector organizations.

**Proposition 4b:** Public sector organizations will adopt an NHRD standard for institutional rather than technical reasons.

**Proposition 4c:** Private sector organizations will adopt an NHRD standard for technical rather than institutional reasons.
Organizational size is an important characteristic in explaining the adoption of an NHRD standard. Large organizations have greater access to resources, are more differentiated, and have greater public visibility than small organizations (Davis & Kalleberg, 2006; Renuka & Venkateshwara, 2006). Monahan et al. (1994), for example, found that large organizations were, first, more likely to offer training opportunities and, second, more likely to offer a greater variety of training than smaller organizations. Garavan, Carbery, and Shanahan (2008) found that large organizations had more extensive training and HRD practices than smaller organizations. Bartram (2005) found that small organizations are less likely to adopt HRM practices than medium or large firms. Research also suggests that an organization may need to reach a critical mass in terms of workforce size before it can justify the adoption of particular HRD practices (Thaler-Carter, 1998). Early U.K. NHRD standard adopters tended to be large organizations with more than 200 employees (Smith et al., 2002), whereas diffusion among small businesses was poor (Hoque, Taylor, Westwood, & Bell, 2002). A perception exists that IIP may be inappropriate in smaller organizations (Hill & Stewart, 1999; Hoque et al., 2005; Ram, 2000). Hill and Stewart (1999, p. 289) found that small- to medium-sized enterprises are “at philosophical odds with the concept of IIP” as these organizations tend not to prioritize HRD. The uptake of IIP among organizations with 10 to 49 employees is extremely low. The U.K. government launched a scheme in 1997 to develop new approaches to increase penetration of this sector (DTZ Pieda Consulting, 1999). Similar research findings were revealed for Australia (Lansbury & Macdonald, 1999). We therefore suggest the following proposition:

**Proposition 5:** The bigger the size of the organization, the more likely the organization will adopt an NHRD standard.

Particular characteristics of the HR function are important in explaining the adoption of an NHRD standard. Davis and Kalleberg (2006) found that organizations with an HR department were more likely to experience normative isomorphic pressures. The existence of an HR department is positively associated with the adoption of practices such as performance management, job descriptions, equal opportunities practices, and processes related to employee voice (Dobbin et al., 1993; Scott, 2008). Scott and Meyer (1994) found that organizations with HR departments are more likely to implement structured training programs.

HR expertise is also important in explaining the adoption of an NHRD standard. HR experience will focus on the competence of specialists in HRD processes. The long-term success and continued growth of an NHRD standard in an organization will be related to the availability of skilled HRD professionals and their understanding of the operation and implementation of the standard (Roberts & Hirsch, 2005).
Top management support for and commitment to HRD are critical to both adoption and retention of the standard (Thomson, Mabey, Storey, Gray, & Iles, 2001; Training & Evaluation Services, 2003). Top management support is considered critical in creating a climate that is supportive of HRD and that commits the necessary resources to the adoption and implementation of the standard. Yap (1989), for example, has suggested that top management take a broader perspective and identify business opportunities that can be secured through the adoption of an NHRD standard. Visible top management support represents an important signal to both internal and external stakeholders concerning the value placed on investment in HRD. It is likely that the continued success of the NHRD standard within the organization will require continued top management support. Successful adoption of the standard will require that those responsible for HRD work with a range of stakeholders to ensure effective implementation of the standard. Top management support will be significant in dealing with resistance to the standard and resolving conflicts that may arise. We therefore suggest the following propositions:

Proposition 6a: The greater the extent of the HR function, the more likely it is that an organization will adopt an NHRD standard.

Proposition 6b: The greater the HRD expertise in the organization, the more likely it is that the organization will adopt an NHRD standard.

Proposition 6c: The greater the extent of top management support, the more likely it is that the organization will adopt an NHRD standard.

The extent of the professionalization of HRD specialists represents an important factor in explaining the adoption of an NHRD standard. Scott and Meyer (1994) have argued that the ASTD acted as a significant stimulus in the HRD arena. They contend that organizations with employees who are members of professional HRD associations are more likely to develop structured training programs and adopt HRD practices that are associated with professionalization. Examples of normative HRD practices include training-needs analysis, HRD evaluation, performance management reviews, trainers’ training, and personal development plans. HRD specialists will continue their professionalization through participation at professional conferences and informal networking with peer professionals. Professionalization also occurs through HRD specialists changing jobs and moving to new organizations. Where they have worked in an NHRD-accredited organization, they are likely to try and achieve the standard in their new organization.

The existence of a workplace champion is important in explaining both the adoption and diffusion of an NHRD standard. The literature highlights the importance of having a champion in the workplace for an innovation to be adopted (Rogers, 2003; Strang & Soule, 1998). In relation to IIP, the need for a workplace champion is well documented (Alberga, 1997; Bell, Taylor, & Thorpe, 2001). Alberga (1997) found that 70% of organizations that had
maintained the momentum for the standard had an internal champion who promoted it in the workplace. In larger organizations, the IIP activist tended to be an HR or training manager, whereas in smaller organizations, it was the managing director (Bell et al., 2001). We therefore suggest the following propositions:

**Proposition 7a:** The greater the degree of professionalization of the HRD specialist, the more likely it is that an organization will adopt an NHRD standard.

**Proposition 7b:** The greater the experience of the HRD specialist in another accredited organization, the more likely it is that an organization will adopt an NHRD standard.

**Proposition 7c:** The greater the existence of a workplace champion, the more likely it is that an organization will adopt an NHRD standard.

The competitive stance of the organization and the competitiveness of the business will affect the adoption of an NHRD standard. Organizations that pursue a cost leadership strategy are less likely to invest in training and development and pursue accreditation of their HRD practices. Schuler and Jackson (1987) found that organizations that pursue a differentiation strategy are more likely to invest in training and development. Mabey and Finch-Lees (2008) report that organizations that pursue differentiation strategies are more likely to invest in a more comprehensive and deep set of HRD practices. Competitive pressures require organizations to invest in HRD. The greater the drive to achieve sustainable competitive advantage, the more likely that an organization will invest in bundles of HRD practices that make a difference in the competitive arena. We therefore suggest the following propositions:

**Proposition 8a:** Organizations that pursue differentiation strategies are more likely to adopt an NHRD standard.

**Proposition 8b:** The greater the competitive pressures, the more likely it is that an organization will adopt an NHRD standard.

The need to externally benchmark is an important reason for the adoption of an NHRD standard (Training & Evaluation Services, 2003). Benchmarking involves imitation and therefore contributes to mimetic isomorphism. Drew (1997, p. 429) describes benchmarking as “a related set of activities which support and enhance strategies of imitation and/or collaboration.” HR professional bodies such as the ASTD in the United States and CIPD in the United Kingdom and Ireland benchmark the HRD practices of high-performance organizations and advise other organizations to benchmark theirs using these standards. We therefore suggest the following proposition:

**Proposition 9:** The greater the extent of external benchmarking of HRD practices, the more likely it is that an organization will adopt an NHRD standard.
Early and Later Adopters

“As an innovation spreads, a threshold is reached beyond which adoption provides legitimacy rather than improved technical performance” (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983, p. 148). Institutional theory offers an important insight into the significant differences between early and late adopters of organizational practices. First, early adopters tend to have different organizational features from late adopters: Second, as practices become widely used, the rationale for adoption changes. In our conceptual framework, these ideas are represented by the arrow at the base of the framework, which highlights that early adopters are more likely to adopt an NHRD standard for technical reasons. Over time, the rationale for adoption changes, with later adopters implementing an NHRD standard primarily for legitimacy reasons.

Scott (2008) proposes that a recurrent pattern emerges in the diffusion of organizational practices. In the first phase of institutionalization, organizations actively choose to adopt the practice. As the practice becomes more widespread, adoption becomes a requirement because of increased normative and cultural pressures. Nonadopters will be perceived as being out of date or even negligent. In terms of rationale, “the logic of action shifts from one of instrumentality to appropriateness” (Scott, 2008, p. 163). Horgan and Mühlau (2003) found that the diffusion of high performance HR practices occurred in two stages: First, organizations that adopted early did so for technical reasons and drove the institutionalization of HR practices; second, the example provided by the early adopters is imitated by others. This primarily occurs because of bandwagon pressures.

Westphal, Gulati, and Shortell (1997) found that early adopters of total quality management practices were more likely to customize quality practices to their specific organizational circumstances to maximize technical benefits. In response, late adopters were more likely to imitate the practices of early adopters. It appears that early adopters reduce the uncertainty associated with particular organizational practices and so become models for other organizations to imitate or copy. We therefore suggest the following propositions:

Proposition 10a: Organizations that are early adopters will adopt an NHRD standard for technical gains.
Proposition 10b: Organizations that are late adopters will adopt an NHRD standard for legitimacy reasons.

Implications for HRD Theory

Our conceptual framework highlights the role of a multiplicity of factors that explain the adoption and diffusion of an NHRD standard. Numerous studies have focused on the adoption and diffusion of organizational practices, spanning many disciplines and focusing on industry, organizational, and
individual-level analyses. The institutional theory literature provides a valuable set of theoretical concepts that help conceptualize the adoption and diffusion of an NHRD standard.

Our framework highlights the interplay of four sets of factors: normative isomorphic influences, reference group characteristics, mimetic isomorphic influences, and characteristics of organizations and their HR systems. The extent of our knowledge of how these various sets of factors interact with each other is relatively poor. NHRD standards are increasingly used by countries to raise the level of professionalization of the HRD function and to ensure that organizations are actually attending to the development of HRD policies and practices that enhance the development and retention of HR and contribute to competitive advantage. Organizations that adopt and implement HRD standards are in a position to sustain superior performance. NHRD and training agencies seek widespread adoption of national standards. Our framework highlights factors that influence the decision to adopt an NHRD standard and its diffusion over time. It is possible that the adoption decision will be influenced by the perceived benefits and characteristics of the standard. The extent of diffusion may be influenced by other factors.

We acknowledge that the variables included in our conceptual framework pose significant challenges for researchers. The operationalization of technical factors, for example, can be explored by asking key organizational decision makers why they adopt and retain an NHRD standard. The problem of empirically separating mimetic and normative effects is acknowledged. We suggest that normative isomorphism via professionalization can be measured through focusing on the level of professionalization of the HRD function. Our framework includes, for example, the question of whether the organization has a full-time HRD professional role and whether that HRD professional is a member of an HRD professional body. Normative isomorphism through social cohesion can be measured by examining whether the HRD professional has worked previously in an NHRD-accredited organization and through the identification of linkages that accredited organizations have with other actors, specifically accreditation bodies, industry sector bodies, interorganizational networks, state training or HRD agencies, industry sector organizations, organizations with whom they have an ownership tie, geographically proximate organizations, and similar-sized organizations. The extent of mimetic isomorphism can be measured through the extent to which organizations pay attention to HRD practices of other reference group organizations. It is also possible to measure the extent of external benchmarking and the types of organizations that are used for benchmarking purposes. Mimetic isomorphism may also be measured through the extent to which organizations pay attention to the practices of successful and prestigious organizations and structurally equivalent organizations. Structural equivalence proves particularly challenging for researchers. No general measure is currently available. We suggest that it could be measured through categorization of the organizations by sector or industry. We acknowledge that this may be a weak measure.
Implications for HRD Practice

Our conceptual framework suggests implications for NHRD policy makers. We need to more fully understand organizational responses to normative and mimetic forces in the environment. An enhanced understanding will enable policy makers to be more informed concerning how organizations respond to external HRD standards. The development of an HRD standard represents a strategy to enable the diffusion of HRD practices among organizations, but its effectiveness is not fully understood. NHRD standards are prescriptive in nature; they adopt a “one size fits all” approach and have difficulty accounting for organizational differences. Our conceptual framework highlights the potential limitations of such an approach. This line of reasoning suggests that an NHRD standard, to be effective, should adopt a best-fit rather than a best-practice approach. Standards need to be sensitive to institutional and cultural characteristics as well as the technical reasons that organizations may have for adopting such a standard.

Our framework highlights that in the initial stage of adoption, organizations focus on whether the NHRD standard confers significant technical benefits. These benefits must be clearly articulated and should be relevant to organizations. National policy makers and national training agencies need to forge strong links with professional bodies, industry sectors, and general business bodies to ensure that they promote and champion the standard. Successful adoption and diffusion is premised on the standard being adopted by successful and prestigious organizations for it to diffuse mimetically. State agencies therefore need to target prestigious organizations in each sector in the initial stages of adoption. As the number of organizations achieving accreditation increases, the process of diffusion will occur through structural equivalence.

Successful adoption and diffusion of such an NHRD standard is critical to its overall legitimacy. Therefore, it is important that HRD scholars and practitioners more fully understand how such standards add value to organizations, to countries, and to the discipline of HRD. HRD practitioners have consistently struggled to demonstrate that what they do adds value to organizations. The challenge is to demonstrate that an NHRD standard can add financial value to the organization in terms of the quality of employees it helps the organization to recruit and retain, and the value of HR to the strategic success of the organization. Senior management will be concerned that an NHRD standard adds to the reputation of the organization. These are challenging issues for which there is no immediate solution.

References


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**Professor Aileen Murphy:** Aileen Murphy is a lecturer at Waterford Institute of Technology, Ireland. Her research interests include national human resource development, adoption and diffusion of organizational practices and organizational networks. She has presented papers in these areas at national and international conferences. Aileen is currently completing her PhD at the University of Limerick.

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