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• PERSPECTIVES ON PEOPLE •

Joseph Kessels interviewed by Jean Woodall

Joseph Kessels is the newly appointed Professor of Human Resource Development at the University of Twente in the Netherlands. Prior to that he held the first chair in HRD to be created in the Netherlands at the University of Leiden. Professor Kessels is also a founding partner of Kessels-Smit, a thriving HRD practice that works mainly with knowledge-based organizations such as business consultancies and other organizations in the information and communications technology sector. A man of many interests (he is also a keen amateur musician and has a small farm) he was interviewed in London in March 2001, during the outbreak of an epidemic of ‘foot and mouth’ disease among animals bred on UK farms. *Human Resource Development International* Reviews Editor **Jean Woodall** conducted the interview.

Jean Woodall: *Joseph, thank you for meeting me during your brief stay in London. I had hoped to meet up with you in Tulsa at the AHRD Research conference, but I am pleased that you are here now.*

Joseph Kessels: Yes, and I was even having second thoughts about coming to London, given the foot and mouth outbreak, as I have livestock on my farm. I decided not to come to Tulsa this year, as I am visiting the USA fairly soon with a group of students. The dominant debate at the AHRD seems to centre around a ‘performance-technology-improvement’ approach to HRD, which is quite far away from my vision and practice. As I see it, we are in the middle of the knowledge revolution to which the human contribution to improve and innovate is central. However, this knowledge revolution cannot be managed in the same way as the ‘productivity revolution’ of the last century. In fact, this was the theme of my recent inaugural lecture at Twente. If we are talking about the knowledge economy, we must recognize that we are talking about an individual’s personal skills, which can only be developed if they are provided with an attractive learning environment that invites them to explore. Two key elements that must be present are what I call ‘mutual attractiveness’ both in terms of relations between employees and also between them and their employer, and also ‘passion’ – you cannot develop smart workers if it is against their will or if the organization strategy prevents them – it’s only possible if they feel a strong affinity with what they are doing. It appears to me that very little of the debate at the AHRD engages with these issues.

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Jean Woodall: *This is a very radical, and bold view of HRD. Surely HRD has to be managerial? Isn't it for this reason that it broke away from its roots in adult education?*

Joseph Kessels: Well that may be the case in the USA, but here in the Netherlands the development was different. As you know, I was appointed to the first chair of HRD in the Netherlands at the University of Leiden in what was the School of Education, but my current chair at Twente is in the School of Education Technology. I suppose that I am unusual in that I was one of the few 'andragogists' in the Netherlands. A lot of this has to do with my earlier education experience at the University of Amsterdam's Department of Social Pedagogy. Here the focus upon community work and adult education was strongly influenced by sociology and critical thinking – in the sense of politically critical – that was around in the late 1960s and early 1970s, especially the radical ideas of Karl Marx and the critical theory of Jürgen Habermas. This was very fruitful for developing the ideas of andragogy. So you can see that for me HRD is not a science of 'social engineering', and has a strong philosophical dimension, which needs to be made explicit. The need for this can be seen in the approach to knowledge management. The trouble is that the move to the knowledge economy has been accompanied by an *engineering* approach to knowledge management, based upon building knowledge systems, extracting knowledge and making it explicit – which has nothing to do with *knowledge sharing*. The key issue for me is rather the *emancipation* of the knowledge worker – engendering a new freedom for knowledge workers, as it is they who are at the centre of knowledge development.

Jean Woodall: *Why is knowledge management an important field for HRD?*

Joseph Kessels: I should like to modify your question. I don't think knowledge management is as important as the fact that we are moving away from an industrial economy to a knowledge economy. Of course, traditional economic aspects such as labour and materials are still important, but the most important thing is to be able to add value to your products and services through knowledge. Success means the ability to improve and innovate, and the people who are the key to this are young professionals. We have a growing number of young professionals in the workplace, and of course their work is different from doing a routine job. The managerial tendency of the last fifty to eighty years was based upon routine work and mass production, and is also at the basis of 'human performance improvement', an approach characterized by standardization with a focus upon efficient procedures and regulations controlled by the 'brains' at the top of the organization, who set the strategy. The problem is that, in the knowledge economy, top management is no longer equipped to direct the organization. It should be done at every level, and it requires a knowledge contribution from young professionals at all levels. So we find an entirely new

approach to managing workers is called for. The old implicit work contract was based upon loyalty and obedience in return for a good salary and the company taking care of you and managing your performance. As soon as the employee offers an entirely different contribution to the company, in terms of contributing ideas, and proposals to innovate radically, they become an ‘owner’ of the organization, because they become part of the collective ambitions of the organization. Already you see this happening in consultancy businesses, and small knowledge-intensive networks.

Jean Woodall: *These are extremely radical ideas, and surely only apply to a minority of organizations, and certainly not the big professional services firms, or other large corporate organizations that might be found in retail banking, public utilities, etc.?*

Joseph Kessels: Of course, for the existing well-established organizations, you can easily put aside these thoughts. There are still so many big companies run in the old way, and the knowledge workers in them do not want to conform to this. However, I have in mind the new consulting firms where ‘mutual attractiveness’ is the emerging concept of employability. These knowledge workers are aware that they are fully responsible for maintaining their own ‘attractiveness’, and if they find themselves in a company where they are not challenged to develop, they will not stay, as this will mean neglecting the development of their market value. So, these young professionals are judging the work environment in terms of learning opportunities. Large companies are not prepared for this, as they are usually run by an older generation. We can see this in consultancies such as my own. People there are not attracted by salaries, but by the type of work. We don’t have managers (I don’t have my own room or a special desk or chair). As employees are co-owners, they set their own salary, and they work when they want – they don’t have fixed work hours. They are looking for an organization which attracts interesting clients, which is project-driven, and where you meet inspiring colleagues. There are of course numerous examples of organizations of this type in the information communication technology sector, especially companies which are growing fast and cannot support a tier of senior managers. And, of course, you can see a similar development at our universities which cannot function with a traditional management structure – you cannot force people to be smart and publish scientific papers. All you can do is to create an attractive environment that inspires them, where constructive discussion and debate can take place.

Jean Woodall: *Hmm! I am not sure that the UK government Department for Education and Employment would agree with you about universities, but I can empathize with this view. But, seriously, Joseph, these are very radical views.*

Joseph Kessels: Yes, maybe I am radical, but not because I want to be

controversial. I have never had an ‘official job’ – I have always worked with a small number of other colleagues who are interested in human learning, and who want to work on projects to find out why in some situations people learn, and why in others they don’t. This always inspired me to find out *why* people *don’t* learn. We have run our business in this way – we have never had centrally imposed targets for growth, turnover, profit, etc. – it’s never been an issue. I suppose I am not ‘domesticated’ enough for real working life! But we don’t just work with small ‘fringe’ organizations. The big corporate organizations – from government departments and public transport to oil companies, big computer firms and major banks – are also interested in working with these ideas, because they are looking for a new unconventional approach to managing knowledge work, and they have a hunch that we might be on to something. On the other hand, I have always published. I did my research – and we always used our profits from our consultancy work to research and publish. It gave me the freedom to do this kind of work. I must say that I am a great fan of the work of Victoria Marsick and Karen Watkins which demonstrated how the everyday working environment is a powerful learning environment; I was doing similar work at the same time here in the Netherlands. For me, the issue of organizing the workplace as a learning environment has never been in the sense of top-down control. My concern has been to unleash the creativity of employees in the workplace, but not in terms of ‘empowerment’ as it is commonly interpreted in the USA – but in terms of emancipation.

Jean Woodall: *Again, these are very radical ideas. Where would you place yourself within the wider field of HRD in the Netherlands? Are you a lone voice, or are there other fellow travellers?*

Joseph Kessels: Well, yes, of course, in the Netherlands there is a mainstream that is very close to the mainstream within the AHRD, but even here our Dutch colleagues admit that the application is somehow different because of the particular corporate culture in the Netherlands. Decision making does not take place in such a top-down way, and we have a long history of collaboration and negotiation. The Dutch were always collaborating with one another to fight a battle against the sea – the country lies at a very low level and is under constant threat of flood. So, ever since the First Dutch Republic in the Sixteenth Century, our constitutional structure has been based upon our water management and flood defence system! We have learnt through long hard experience that the only possibility for survival is through co-operation and negotiation. In modern business, this translates into a strong tradition of worker participation, including well-developed systems for profit sharing, worker-stockholders and with directors common in most organizations. Also, the ‘social partners’ (trade unions and business federations) have a strong tradition of co-operative industrial relations that is very different from that in France and the UK, and even Germany. We have major conflicts when these traditions of negotiation,

co-operation and deliberation are violated. Now, besides the mainstream ideas about HRD in the Netherlands, there is also a current new emerging look at ways of organizing learning based upon networks, autonomous task forces, self-directed teams and learning projects. I myself am working on a research project looking at ‘knowledge productivity’ in terms of a personal subjective skill that cannot be objectified.

If I were to belong to a particular school, I would call myself a social constructionist. There are a number of Dutch scholars who share my social constructionist approach to HRD. Many of us are doing research into ‘knowledge productivity’ that acknowledges that knowledge cannot be objectified and ‘captured’ or ‘owned’ by any individual. Knowledge productivity is the ability of a team or an individual to signal relevant information, to develop new capabilities and to apply these to the step-wise improvement and radical innovation of work processes, products and services. If you bring these ideas into HRD, I would define ‘knowledge’ in terms of a personal individual skill, capability, capacity or craftsmanship – I hesitate to use the term ‘competence’ because it has so many different connotations. As soon as we start writing a competency profile and statements, we are back into objectifying knowledge. It really doesn’t add anything. That is why I hesitate to use the term competency. I often use music as an example. In my inaugural lecture at Twente, I played a recording of a Vivaldi aria sung by Cecilia Bartoli. I explained that we were listening to her interpretation of the aria, but posed the question of whether her knowledge was captured on the CD. The CD only provides us with information about her capability – even if we listen to the aria several times, we shall never be able to perform it the same way. When Bartoli dies, we still have the information about her extraordinary capability, but the capability itself is gone. Therefore, in the knowledge economy, what we are trying to develop is capability, and even if we try to *transform* tacit knowledge to explicit, we are not *sharing* knowledge. The only knowledge that really matters is tacit, and if we try to make it explicit, we can never capture it. Capturing knowledge is really a diversion – what is really important is developing it. This is what I mean when I say that you cannot make people smart ‘against their will’ – this is the opposite of the assumptions underlying the ‘human performance improvement’ approach to HRD. This is why I stress the importance of creating an environment that can help – where there is ‘mutual attractiveness’ and a passion and affinity for the work. Now I grant that this leaves many senior corporate managers uncomfortable, as this does not comply with conventional strategic thinking – allowing workers to shape their own work and their work environment is threatening. However, a large part of manual work has disappeared, and that which remains now requires the innovative, creative capacity of the human mind. So, this is why for knowledge management the work environment needs to be seen as a learning environment. I should like to adopt Rosemary Harrison’s concept of strategic capability, and apply this to learning and knowledge productivity. I feel strong affinity with John Walton when he argues that human development becomes part of the

fabric of an organization. Indeed, I would go so far as to say there might come a time when the HRD function will be more central to business success than, for example, the finance function!

Jean Woodall: *That's yet another very bold assertion, Joseph! But it also poses a challenge for the HRD profession. If the everyday work environment is to be a learning environment, what does all this mean for the professional practice and organization of HRD?*

Joseph Kessels: Well, shouting about how important HRD is and how it should receive board-level representation does not help! It is more important to devote energy to making a thorough analysis of the quality of the learning environment in a company. Our approach is derived from my research on the central concept of what we call the 'corporate curriculum' – the plan for learning for the organization. By this I do not mean the catalogue of all the courses, but what a social constructionist would call the 'rich landscape' of the work environment that invites you to explore, meet others and develop. This involves analysing information about seven learning functions, including: the approach to developing subject matter or domain-specific expertise (for example, in a hospital the various forms of medical and nursing skills and knowledge) and the capacity to problem solve in these areas – it is surprising that many companies that are good in certain domains find great difficulty in solving new problems. In addition we try to find out about the support provided for reflective skills and meta-cognitions – does the team develop the ability to learn about the way they do things? The attention paid to the development of interactive and communication skills is also an important indicator of the capability of an organization to access other networks of interesting professionals who may be far removed from their organization. Fifth, the development of self-regulation among individual employees in terms of their motivations, affections and affinities is a very important function to analyse, as it tells you what enables (or inhibits) bright people to work on their passion and to absorb the relevant information. I am interested in the different ways in which different people react to the external world. You could say that in some ways I draw upon the ideas of Maria Montessori about the natural stages of human development and the importance of the educator being sensitive to this in respect of each individual child. The human mind always wants to expand, but it has no idea where, and you cannot impose any direction upon it. So, in terms of HRD practice, as a social constructionist, I think the task is to offer a 'rich landscape' within which that human mind can expand, rather than prescribing a precise curriculum by setting learning objectives or offering learning strategies. So applying these ideas to a knowledge-intensive company means that it is useless to impose a strategy on them for improving knowledge development, or creating a large directory of learning interventions – it is more important to encourage them to develop new ideas, and to create an environment where these can be explored and

implemented. That is precisely what we scholars do when we go to a conference! We look at the conference proceedings and select the sessions to attend that interest us. Our decision is made on the basis of freedom and interest. It is that type of thinking that I should like to incorporate into HRD.

Jean Woodall: *So what does this mean for the defining of the field of HRD, and the training required for those that enter the HRD profession.*

Joseph Kessels: In a way, I am not at all bothered about defining HRD. I remember the First Conference on HRD in Europe held at Kingston in January 2000, when you discussed these issues. I am sorry, but I am just not at all worried about specific definitions. All this does is to establish boundaries and exclude – it is useless and stops progression; it leads to painful discussions among a small group of academics, and alienates others from the field of study. You know, when I gave my inaugural lecture at the University of Twente last month, I subconsciously omitted any discussion of defining HRD. For me, the purpose of HRD is the development of knowledge productivity and the development of human capability and how these can be used in a professional context. You may have a different opinion, so we have a basis for constructive dialogue. As to the knowledge base required for HRD, there are many possible perspectives. For example, in Leiden we drew on both sociological and psychological theories, while at Twente we have a strong tradition in business orientation and in educational technology to which I have added my much more relational approach.

Jean Woodall: *But surely you must be concerned about the preparation of those who practise in HRD? This is one profession where the barriers to entry are very low, and there are many people practising it who have a weak understanding of the theoretical base upon which it draws.*

Joseph Kessels: But whose concern is this? At a minimum, an understanding of sociology, psychology and philosophy seem to me to be important. But, you look at any introductory handbook on any of these disciplines, and they do not seem to be broad enough. A training in social science disciplines does not guarantee anything! A trained psychologist may feel comfortable with the backing of an accepted academic discipline, but when he or she does lousy work, the respective discipline is not much help! What is much more important is the opportunity and ability to reflect about work, and the opportunity for professionals to come to academic seminars, pose intricate questions and engage in discussion. As to whether these nineteenth-century social science disciplines contribute anything in themselves – I'm doubtful! They represent information about the capability of others, and they can be helpful in developing my own capabilities in dealing with current issues.

Jean Woodall: *You have provided yet another bold statement, which, I am sure,*

will generate considerable debate elsewhere among members of the AHRD and the University Forum for HRD! But, perhaps finally, you would like to say something about what you see as the future for HRD research and scholarship?

Joseph Kessels: I am a very strong promoter of collaboration between universities and companies. Many of my students are in companies. I have been asked by the Dutch Ministry of Education to advise on this. This is a new departure, as previously the tradition was for universities to be very separate from the world of work. However, I think it is unwise to continue this in the new knowledge economy. I think that the future for research in HRD requires greater contact with our partners in the field to help us build our research agenda. At Twente we are building up a network of companies to help us do this, and in consequence many of the professionals within those companies are becoming aware of the importance of HRD to their business. So, this also has implications for the way we do research. In this context, traditional, 'objective', large-scale research that aims at universal generalization is difficult to do, and 'developmental research' based upon a repeated sequence of small-scale analysis, design, investigation, interpretation and evaluation is a more fruitful way forward. To me, interesting research topics are: the impact of the knowledge economy on learning organizations, organizational barriers to self-directed learning, self-organized teams and self-regulation of motivation and affinities (yes – in search of passion), mutual attractiveness in networks, the corporate curriculum and the factors that promote knowledge productivity. However, we should not be searching for universal truths within the domain of HRD.

Jean Woodall: *Well, you have provided a radical challenge at every stage of this interview! I should love to continue the discussion on this one, but maybe that is for another time? Thank you so much.*