

Chapter 5

People as Technology and Systems Thinking in the Context of Human Resource Development

ABSTRACT

Chapter five describes the people as technology (PT) concept and the complex relationships of technology development and people development within organizations. Systems theory is a foundational theory of human resource development. This chapter describes how the PT concept relates to systems theory in the context of HRD. Implications for how ethical and unethical behavior influences organizational systems are provided. Comparison of the five values of people and technology development to six themes of high technology development, the six major factors to determine knowledge-worker productivity, and the COVID-19 pandemic are also included.

INTRODUCTION

Organizations say people are their greatest asset, yet they sometimes refer to them as employees, human resources, human capital, associates, union members, subordinates, indirect labor, direct labor, knowledge worker, among other names. Gale's (1980) concept of value added can be used to measure "the physical output of each worker and the value of that output (p.79). The

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value-added concept does not measure employees' effort to create output. The five values of people and technology development may assist stakeholders as they continue to strive to measure and understand people and technology's value to the organization.

AI and automation have added a new dimension to the workplace as it relates to the understanding of people and technology in the workplace. AI and automation not only have a productivity impact, but also an ethical impact as organization managers and leaders seek to strike the right balance when displacing employees with technology, use technology to monitor employee performance and behavior, and use AI in employee selection (Acemoglu & Restrepo, 2019; Donahoe & Metzger, 2019; Gordon, 2020; Kalimeri & Tjostheim, 2020; Müller, 2020). Despite exorbitant profits daily, some organizations continuously work toward maintaining and enhancing their competitiveness. They try to have the right blend of people and technology to achieve the highest possible return on investment (ROI) (Gale, 1980; Jasson & Govender, 2017; Phillips, 2003; Wang et al., 2002).

Southwest Airlines was one of the first organizations that had a University for People (Hollis, 2003). As valuable assets, people should be acknowledged as such. Understanding the character and mind of the people that work for the organization is what matters (Hughes, 2012). The mind of the employee has been undervalued by organizations. Jack Welch (2005) wrote that "A middle-aged appliance worker who was at one Work-Out spoke for thousands of people when he told me, 'For twenty-five years, you paid for my hands when you could have had my brain as well - for nothing'" (p. 56). Ramsey (1986) noted that employees are three dimensional: body [behavioral], spirit [cultural], and mind [cognitive]. It would seem that organizations would want to work with all aspects of an employee's body, mind, and spirit through behavioral, cultural, and cognitive initiatives in the workplace. Ramsey also suggested that management only cares about the body and not the spirit and mind of the employee which can reduce the employees' will and zeal to perform productively for the organization. This chapter discusses and explains how the PT concept relates to systems theory in the context of HRD. This content has become much more relevant during the fourth industrial revolution and the COVID-19 pandemic.

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