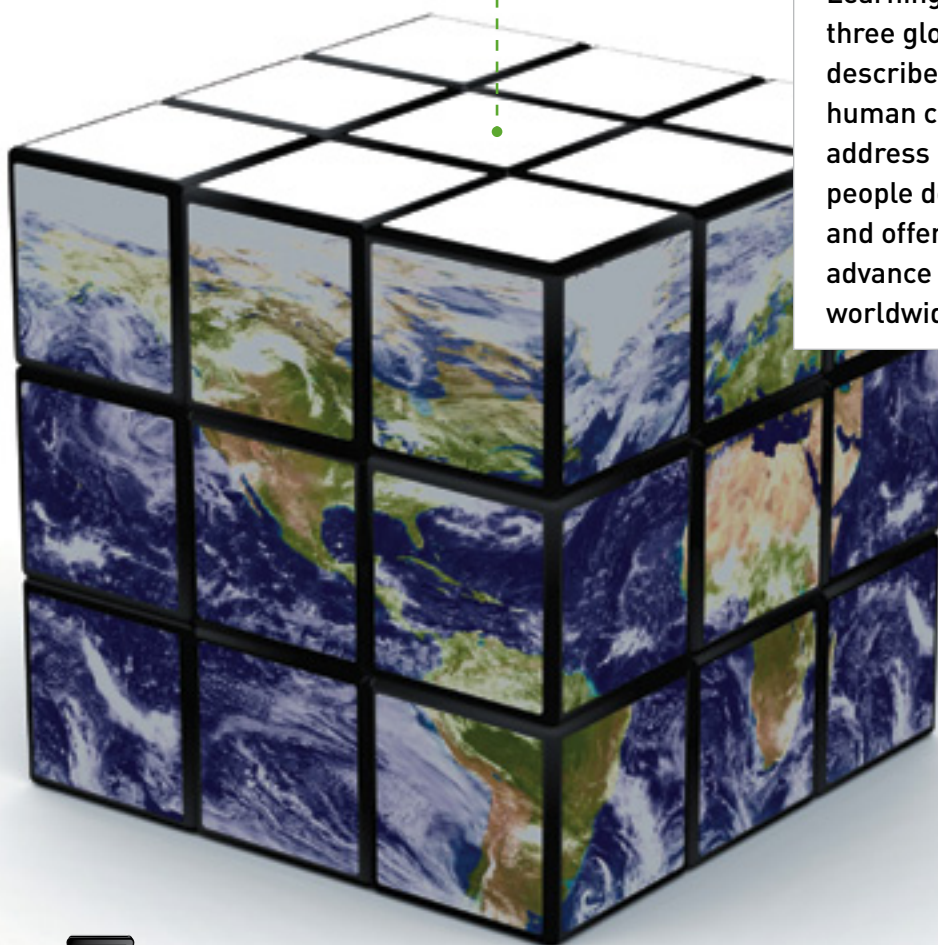


# Human Capital Realities Pose **Challenges** Across the Globe

By Fernando Sanchez-Arias, Hannelore Calmeyn, Ger Driesen, and Evert Pruis



Learning leaders from three global regions describe current human capital realities, address barriers to people development, and offer steps to advance the profession worldwide.



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Global human resource development involves understanding and engaging in the unique human capital challenges and opportunities represented by various regions of the world. This article examines current learning and development trends in Asia, Latin America, and Europe and describes viable strategies for the future.

### Asia: Collaborative and results-driven learning

Such countries as China and India—part of the developing BRIC nations (Brazil, Russia, India, and China)—represent some of the fastest growing economies in the world. More traditional markets, such as Korea and Japan, also remain dynamic players in the global workforce despite the economic crisis. In Asian national and multinational companies, people are becoming more mobile, and a scarcity of globally aware local workers and culturally knowledgeable foreign managers have made human capital development (HCD) a critical aspect of business strategy.

“The high and growing mobility of executives, together with knowledge transfer, is one of the main challenges that Asian organizations face,” says Avinash Chandarana, group learning and development director at MCI, a global association, communications, and event management company. “The dilemma some organizations have is whether it is better to invest in training associates with high potential who can grow inside the company and hold managerial positions in the mid- to long-term, or to acquire trained talent from the market to fill those positions,” explains Chandarana, who leads MCI’s global leadership academy.

The scarcity of Western-Eastern (WE) executives is another challenge the Asian region faces, according to Sally Chew, director of international relations and industry services and director of The Centre for TransCultural Studies at Temasek Polytechnic in Singapore, and Amy Amrita Daga, senior lecturer of Temasek Polytechnic’s Centre for TransCultural Studies. “More and more Asian companies require WE executives—managers and directors able to balance and leverage the best practices and cultural strengths of the West with those of the East,” says Chew.

While high-performing companies in the West are expanding their global workforces and looking at the East for their growing initiatives, Asian companies are going global by opening branches in the West, merging with Western allies, and acquiring companies on their side of the world to sustain their growing strategies.

“Learning and development programs need to address more than just the cultural differences that arise when doing business in another country—or the same country—with an integrated team of supervisors, colleagues, and associates from different national and organizational cultures and a variety of generations,” says Daga. “The workforce tapestry today is very different from the one in the past 20 years.”

Training and retaining local or foreign talent to recover learning investment and

developing WE associates by making learning experiences multicultural and multigenerational are among the main concerns of HCD senior executives in Asia. But there are more issues to consider, according to Solomon Salvis, CEO of EduRiser Learning Solutions in Mumbai, India.

“How to transform knowledge into results remains a transcendent challenge for our clients. It seems very basic, but that is what C-suite executives see when they invest in learning,” affirms Salvis. His experiences working with high-performing organizations in India and other countries have led to his conviction that HCD executives need to translate knowledge into better financial, commercial, operational, and human results.

James Engel, senior director at APM Group in Bangkok, Thailand, agrees with Salvis when he says that there is a need to migrate from training to on-the-job learning and from building competence to developing capabilities that can be measured, observed, and translated into business results improvement.

Solutions to HCD challenges in Asia must be strategic, innovative, and holistic. Learning leaders in this region suggest the following strategies.

- Assess competence and long-term commitment of associates, supervisors, and managers with high potential of retention, and build different learning and development strategies for this group to ensure a greater return-on-investment and higher learning effectiveness and engagement.

- Conduct cultural and human diligence as part of the instructional learning design process, ensuring both Western and Eastern views are considered, as well as the local, global, and “glocal” (local factors with global perspective) aspects of the market and business.
- Involve a sponsor, client, and end user in learning design, and translate the learning strategy into a business strategy that can be measured and clearly linked to results improvement.
- Blend media and methodologies according to learners’ levels of expertise, engagement, and cultural alignment.

### Latin America: The 3R challenge

“Retaining the talent we have developed not only inside our company but in our region is one of our greatest challenges,” says Arelis Díaz, human resources director for Latin America at Telefonica, a major global telecom company based in Spain with a strong presence in Latin America. This challenge exceeds the impact of the economic crisis—it is connected to the nature of the new workforce profile.

“We used to have people join our company with an estimated term of service of seven to 15 years,” Díaz says. “Now new staff comes with an expectation to learn and develop, obtain an excellent reference for better positions, and leave after two to three years.”

“They not only migrate from our country to more developed economies, but from their current jobs to better jobs,” adds Arianna Martinez, human capital corporate director at SIGO, a major retailer in Venezuela. Martinez, who co-founded SIGO’s corporate university, explains that maintaining a workforce with high levels of competence and commitment is a top priority for any business in Latin America.

“We need to plan our learning and development programs to fill the gap left by those workers migrating to other companies and markets at a pace that makes it too difficult to cover internal client demands,” she adds.

This challenge is felt not only by large

national companies such as SIGO; it also is a concern for global companies such as Chevron, one of the top major oil and gas firms in the world. Carolina Ferrer, Chevron’s human resources manager in Venezuela, calls this the 3R challenge.

“Recruiting, retaining, and retraining is the essence of our job, and the learning and development effort is crucial in our quest to achieve global and local human talent management objectives linked to the business,” she explains. “Our talent is moving rapidly to countries with better economies, inside of our own company. Our problem is not a matter of organizational retention, but of geographical retention, and this is affected by economic and social conditions in developing countries. Keeping our talent capable and aligned to our standards requires a very agile learning and development system.”

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—Arelis Díaz,  
Human Resources Director for  
Latin America, Telefonica

Another major challenge in Latin America is making the content of learning and development programs relevant and adapted to different operational, cultural, and generational realities.

“Sometimes it seems that the operations run faster than the learning initiatives, and it is my job to ensure they are aligned in time and space and that each formal and informal learning experience in our company is relevant to the learner and linked to the business,” says Karina Mendoza, learning and development manager at Xerox in Mexico.

Mendoza’s views are shared by Gerardo Molina, human capital manager at Bulkmatic, the main provider of supply and cargo logistics services in northern Mexico. Molina affirms that his

main concern is to make learning attractive and useful to people from different cultural backgrounds, generations, and levels of experience.

“The quality and effectiveness of our learning and development programs—such as our leadership diploma—have made us a business partner to the financial, commercial, and operational units,” he says.

Solutions to these challenges require specific action plans. Successful HCD executives in Latin America recommend these strategies:

- Build the learning and development program to include the support of the chief financial officer, chief operational officer, and executive in charge of business and sales, ensuring that every learning initiative is linked to strategic objectives.
- When designing learning content and delivery, ask people from different operational, cultural, and generational backgrounds to share their needs, desires, concerns, and challenges.
- Blend tech with touch. No matter the effectiveness of virtual learning, people still seek face-to-face learning interaction. Finding the appropriate mix for an organization’s unique cultural and strategic demands is the difference between the success and failure of learning and development initiatives in a climate of constant and rapid change.
- Provide effective systems, procedures, equipment, resources, and conditions that allow learners to apply what they learn in the field.
- Create a knowledge management system that preserves the know-how of essential company and market business functions to protect the company from workforce migration.

### Europe: The organization of the future

To create a more strategic role for human resources development (HRD) in Europe, learning professionals need to ask the right questions and find solutions that enable stakeholders to understand the bigger picture. Belgium-based VOV Lend Network, a network for learning and



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development professionals, asked its members a couple of questions to provoke this kind of thinking: “What will the organization of the future look like?” and “In what kind of society will the organization of the future operate?” The answers supplied tremendous creative insight about the role of HRD practitioners.

**Just-in-time, just-enough learning.** Future learning initiatives will be increasingly affected by rapid change, and HRD departments must create learning initiatives that can keep up with these changes. The question of learning relevance may be most important: People and organizations alike do not have the patience to invest in learning activities that take a long time and for which relevance is not immediately clear.

Just-in-time learning requires that individuals cope with ongoing changes. Beyond providing relevant learning products, HRD must create contexts in which people can think proactively and possibly co-create new competencies as needed. Anticipating the future while simultaneously solving immediate needs is a challenge for most HRD practitioners.

**Autonomy and cohesion.** Closely linked to an increase in highly skilled, knowledge-intensive work is employees’ expectation of greater autonomy in the workplace and resistance of micromanagement practices. To provide greater employee autonomy, many organizations in Europe are experimenting with time-and-place independent working by providing telecommuting options or co-working spaces.

However, organizations want to ensure that employees are still connected to their goals and culture. This poses a new challenge for HRD to maintain a connection to the organization yet steer clear from classic, hierarchical management methods. Building trusted relationships and acknowledging employees as partners in

achieving business goals will further bolster autonomy.

**Blurring of organizational boundaries.**

This trend is especially true for knowledge workers in Europe who are, for example, working not only on an operational team, but also in a network with other organizations to create new value streams. Industrial workers often are sent to other local companies in times of economic downturn, with the understanding that the organization will ask them to return when demand rises again. These examples, which are now exceptions, are expected to become more common in the future.

**Key challenges in management development.** According to Niall Gavin, head of human resources and learning technologies at Firstgroup UK, “To be successful, the organization needs to be flexible and resilient when experts leave the company and walk away with knowledge and experience. Knowledge and expertise need to be more distributed to fill the gap when needed and to benefit from employees at different levels adding their capabilities and bringing in more service.” To work toward these goals, learning leaders invest significantly in talent management and succession planning.

Mirjam Burgers-Gerritsen, human resources expert and consultant in management development, and the chief architect of the Managers with Impact program for frontline ING managers in the Netherlands, characterizes the ING organization as both “eager to develop and a pressure cooker.”

Organizational and staffing changes are frequent, and managers may be left feeling that there is little time for learning and development. Burgers-Gerritsen recognizes ING managers’ willingness to learn. Learning is either fully informal, via the pace of daily change and challenges, or fully formal, through the Managers with Impact training program.

ING frontline managers prefer to learn from peers. “Any training we develop that will allow managers to learn from each other is an instant success,” Burgers-Gerritsen comments. Brought together in this formal learning environment, managers are eager to interact, ask questions, and get to work.

**The future learning organization.**

When looking at the future of learning from a general UK perspective, Gavin has some clear ideas. Organizations will place more emphasis on learning best practices by sharing knowledge and experiences through peer networks. Also, there will be a shift away from formal learning and toward supported and facilitated informal learning.

Burgers-Gerritsen concurs and adds her own vision: She sees a broader HR perspective in which learning and development takes a more prominent role by becoming better aligned to the strategy and structure of the organization. Learning experts must become competent in consulting managers on such matters as change, reorganization, engagement, and mobility.

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