

Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR) and Human Resource Management (HRM): A Valuable Link

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- 1. Prior Learning Assessment Strategies for the HR Practitioner:
Present Challenges and Future Directions**
- 2. Recognizing PLAR Strategies for the Human Resource
Practitioner**

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Introduction

“Globalization, demographic changes, competition among nations for skilled people, and the emergence of large-scale knowledge-based industries have made it more important than ever for Canada to make the most of the knowledge and skills of its people. Non-recognition of learning is a major cost to Canada and Canadians today; tomorrow, recognition of learning can be a major economic gain—if we get it right. If we succeed, our businesses can become more productive and competitive, and our people will earn more and enjoy a higher standard of living.”¹

At its annual conference in October 2006, the Canadian Association for Prior Learning Assessment (CAPLA) hosted sessions for human resource professionals on the topic of prior learning assessment and recognition (PLAR) and its linkage with human resource management (HRM). During these discussions a number of considerations were identified, including the following:

1. What is, or could be, the connection between PLAR and HRM—benefits, processes, strategies and audiences?
2. Certification: standards, policies and guidelines for procedures to integrate PLAR across functional groups.
3. Competency profiling: does it relate to PLAR in HRM, for example, for identification of leadership candidates or succession planning.
4. Cultural and communication differences in the workplace: is there the potential for PLAR practices to alleviate some barriers?
5. Professional development opportunities for current and future HRM practitioners regarding PLAR.

The link between PLAR and HRM is appealing for the direct and indirect benefits it could provide. There are also many considerations with regard to effective and efficient implementation processes associated with such a linkage. This document offers a glimpse into some of the considerations, challenges and benefits of a PLAR-HRM linkage.

¹ Bloom, M. and M. Grant, *Brain Gain: The Economic Benefits of Recognizing Learning and Learning Credentials in Canada*, p. 34.

The Need to Recognize Prior Learning

As the Canadian Council of Learning noted: “Lifelong learning plays a critical role in both the success of individual Canadians and the success of our country as a whole. On a personal level, Canadians benefit from improved learning through higher wages, better job prospects, improved health and a more fulfilling life—while Canada stands to gain a more robust economy and stronger bonds within and between communities.”²

While ‘learning’ has traditionally been associated with a classroom setting, there is increased awareness and acceptance of the broader scope of learning, including hands-on training, self-directed research, peer workshops, or any combination of these, and other options for growth of knowledge, skills, competencies, etc.

The perceived timing of the learning has also evolved to extend beyond the school years to span all stages of life. “Learning is a process involving the development of knowledge, skills, and values throughout a person’s life, from early childhood through adulthood.”³ Yet the acceptance or recognition of ‘learning’ remains associated with formalized certification or accreditation such as degrees, diplomas, and licensing. While this is attributed, understandably, to a need for standardization it impedes the progress of those who have followed less-traditional learning paths. If such learning was recognized, not only would the individual benefit through advanced opportunities but employers, communities and society could also potentially benefit from the applications of this skill and knowledge.

The strong economic and social benefits are outlined in the Conference Board of Canada report cited earlier. The authors emphasize the need for prior learning assessment and recognition with key indicators such as the following:

- With recognition for learning and learning credentials, there would be an increase in Canadians’ income totaling \$4.1 to \$5.9 billion annually;
- More than 540,000 individuals would gain an average of \$8,000-12,000 each year from improved learning recognition;

² <http://www.ccl-cca.ca/NR/rdonlyres/874A39DC-EE33-4F5B-B940-D5DE2992D1DA/0/Brochure CLIENGLR.pdf>

³ *Ibid*

- Three groups would particularly benefit: immigrants, people with prior learning through work and training, and transferees between postsecondary institutions or licensed occupations between provinces.⁴:

A report issued by the Canadian Council on Learning reinforces the message that economic success is dependent upon a skilled and adaptable workforce⁵ The report notes that Canada's investment in workplace training lags behind that of other countries. While the gains of recognizing non-traditional learning or skills acquisition are stronger for the employee, there are also benefits to employers. With the skills shortages looming, and the anticipated impact of the shortages increasing rapidly, employers are searching for feasible solutions. Given that there are individuals seeking employment more closely aligned with their abilities, and given that there are employers seeking qualified (competent) employees, why not fill the gap? How could PLAR contribute to the solution?

PLAR and HRM

A valuable tool for capturing the value of skills of both current and potential employees, PLAR is "a systematic process for reflecting on identity, and articulating and demonstrating prior learning for the purpose of documenting competencies that are recognized by educational institutions, workplaces, credentialing organizations, regulatory bodies, and others."⁶ Within organizations, the PLAR process would customarily be associated with the individual(s) responsible for the human resources functions. HRM may be defined as "the effective use of human resources to enhance organizational performance,"⁷ which encompasses "the recruitment and selection of appropriate staff and management of the employment relationship, including contracts, collective bargaining, reward systems and employee involvement, and considers the strategic and operational view of human resource requirements."⁸

The Canadian Council of Human Resource Associations has categorized eight HR-related areas or functional dimensions called the Required Professional Capabilities (RPCs), including

⁴ Bloom, M. and M. Grant, *op. cit.*, p.1.

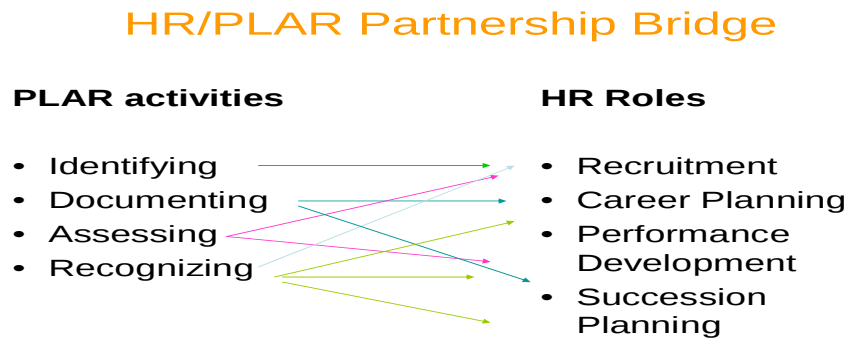
⁵ Bailey, A. *Connecting the Dots...Linking Training and Investment to Business Outcomes and the Economy*.

⁶ "About PLAR," Recognition for Learning.

⁷ Pearson Education *Glossary*. <http://wps.prenhall.com/wps/media/objects/213/218150/glossary.html#H>

⁸ *Ibid.* <http://wps.pearsoned.co.uk/wps/media/objects/1513/1550326/glossary/glossary.html#H>

professional practice in human resources that mirror the categories in the broad definition.⁹ The figure below, presented by Ken Kowalski at the 2006 CAPLA conference provides an excellent visual representation of the links between PLAR and HRM.¹⁰



Recruitment: selecting new employees

An overview of the linkage between PLAR and one of the HRM tasks within the recruitment role—selection—provides some examples of the challenges and benefits that may flow from the linkages illustrated above. The human resources role of selecting qualified employees with the requisite knowledge, skills, attitudes and behaviours to succeed in the workplace is of primary importance. It is seldom a simple task to screen applications, including supporting documentation, and assess the qualifications in the context of current and future needs. The task may be complicated in instances where applicants seek recognition of prior learning. In itself, this may be challenging for both employer and applicant; if there are external standards that must be met by the employer, there may be even greater hesitancy in accepting PLAR.

“Often, they [employers] adopt a pragmatic approach that sees them focusing on the most cost-effective and reliable evaluation and selection techniques in an effort to avoid costly mistakes. This can make them disinclined to take up new methods for recognizing learning even if these have the potential to be very accurate.”¹¹

⁹ *The Required Professional Capabilities–HR’s Body of Knowledge.*

¹⁰ Kowalski, K., “PLAR and HRM.”

¹¹ Bloom, M. and M. Grant, *op. cit.*, p. 8.

Assessment tools and strategies were often developed from, and for, specific contexts. Their development is complex, generally involving extensive time and resource commitments. When striving for efficient use of time and resources, investments in adaptations or customizations of the resources to fit local contexts may initially appear too costly; however, if achieved they may ultimately generate a higher benefit overall.

Yet, it is apparent that tools and strategies to support individuals in obtaining PLAR need to be adaptable to meet the diverse needs of various agencies, programs, employers, and both regulated and non-regulated professions. There is incompatibility and a lack of universal standards. The multiplicity of provincial, national and international standards makes transfer more complex. And incompatibility between learning institutions, workplaces, and occupations creates significant practical problems such as courses that do not match by a number of credits or are out of semester sequence between institutions or branches of the same institution.¹²

Credential recognition from accrediting bodies is not the only problem; there is a multitude of agencies to assess foreign degrees in terms of Canadian qualifications. It has also been noted that workplace specific training recognition and assessment is difficult to conduct. In *Brain Gain*, cited earlier, the authors note that:

“Firm-specific training delivered by firms is not recognized by other firms, professional licensing and standards bodies, or colleges and universities...[and] lack of universal workplace training credentials, because employers do not support them, means that employers do not recognize other employers’ credentials, and instead invest in firms-specific training that has a low probability of being transferred to rivals.”¹³

They also suggest that:

“Employers could use links to their own industry associations, and to professional licensing bodies that certify many of their highly skilled employees, to bring into being private credentials that are recognized widely within the employer community at either the sectoral or national level...Ideally, such private credentials could be linked to public education and professional and regulatory bodies to create more holistic learning systems that would recognize the full range of education, training and experiential learning of Canadians.”¹⁴

¹² Ibid, p. 9.

¹³ Ibid, p. 11

¹⁴ Ibid, p. 34

Prior learning assessment and recognition of international credentials have been key agenda items at governmental levels.¹⁵ This recognition and expansion is due to a number of factors. One relates to the credentialing processes of the agencies by providing them with the tools to assess and evaluate foreign credentials. A related concern is acceptance of the credentials within the particular sector, especially if there are potential implications to regulations, such as workplace safety, that are determined by yet other agencies or organizations.

Determining equivalency through PLAR is especially challenging when it comes to evaluating a candidate's prior performance and deciding on acceptable levels of performance. For example, what one jurisdiction considers an acceptable level of safety considerations may be insufficient within another jurisdiction. Also, as processes develop, the levels of complexity may increase, with the result that a level of performance that may have been satisfactory at one time, and credentialed as such, may be deemed inadequate at a later date.

It is important to note that the focus of PLAR in the screening and selection process should be on competencies not credentials. In PLAR, it's the learning that matters, and the competency that counts. As noted previously, it is the measurement and documentation of knowledge or skills relative to specific requirements of the position, workplace, trade or profession that is essential.

“Recognizing learning is a real-world issue for employers. For recognition to be meaningful for them it has to be based on the demonstrated authenticity, currency, quality, relevancy, trustworthiness and transferability of the learning...When individuals can demonstrate that their skills and knowledge meet standards for these criteria, then employers will feel comfortable in recognizing them.”¹⁶

While there has been much focus on recognition of international credentials to potentially supplement employment needs in the workforce, an interesting perspective was raised in a rural community consultation meeting regarding workforce development. Skilled workers who are unemployed and retraining for a new field may view the arrival of internationally-trained professionals as competition and a further barrier to their own reintegration to the workforce. For example, in communities that have been traditionally forest-resource based, the industry downturn has resulted in significant layoffs that have affected not only the workers but also their

¹⁵ *The Globe and Mail*: Sept. 26, 2006, p. B19; Dec. 15, 2006, p. C1; Dec. 19, 2006, p. A22.

¹⁶ Bloom, M. and M. Grant, *op. cit.*, p. 5.

families, communities, regions and provinces. Many desire to be retrained so that they can continue to reside and work ‘at home’ rather than moving to a job in another community either independently—which would result in separation from their family—or by uprooting the entire family. Either of these options has obvious impacts on the individual, family, and community. The social fabric of the community is torn. Anecdotal remarks suggest that these workers would welcome the opportunity to have their skills assessed through a PLAR process, so they could better access training for transition to a new field in their home community. This could help retain the community and potentially bring new life to the community through development of new or existing local economic opportunities.

PLAR as a screening tool: additional considerations

While the applicant is likely to have concerns about the acceptance of his/her credentials, other questions or anxieties may also arise. What will be the consequences of this recognition? What is at stake or what could I lose with this assessment? Will there be a loss of employment or [unacceptable] change in my career path? How will my peers perceive me? What will my family, friends, and peers think?

For employers and accrediting agencies, these are important factors to take into account, particularly if an employee appears reluctant to participate in these types of assessment opportunities. Patrick O’Neill’s presentation at CAPLA 2006 noted that competency profiling exercises may address such concerns.¹⁷

The financial implications of the PLAR process also need to be addressed. Who should bear the cost? Many employers, especially small and medium enterprises, are concerned about the costs to prepare and maintain currency in PLAR techniques, especially in comparison to other, more traditional and readily apparent costs such as accounting and auditing, or even newer legislated functions such as maintenance of workplace health and safety standards. Employers are concerned that, after they have covered the costs of PLAR, the employee may later use the credential to gain employment elsewhere with a resulting negative impact to the original sponsoring employer. This potential scenario may well explain some reluctance on the part of

¹⁷ O’Neill, P., “Key Leadership Competencies for the Public Service of Canada.”

employers to cover direct and indirect costs of PLAR without having ways to safeguard their investment.

Employers in all sectors face an ever-changing environment in which they must stay competitive:

“New technology, complex information systems, and new management approaches represent one kind of challenge. Another comes from the need for enhanced service to the public...[Employers] are being challenged to develop a culture of continuous learning to ensure that employees have the skills required to handle new workplace demands.”¹⁸

In today’s work environment, ability to use written materials is even more essential than before. Literacy is key to reading instructions or guidelines and for documenting tasks and procedures. An emerging realization is that there are varying degrees of literacy within the working population, and that the definition of workplace literacy and its associated issues is varied and requires serious consideration. The provincial government of Ontario supported the launch of various literacy initiatives in the spring of 2007 to expand the perceptions of literacy and to view the development of skills to extend beyond solely the work environment.

How should individual training be provided? HRM personnel are often the first contacts for workplace educators and may envision themselves as being responsible for coordinating education/training activities. The question arises as to how HRM personnel can and should deliver training. There are numerous options from the traditional classroom: coaching, computer-assisted instruction, on-the-job learning, etc. It is incumbent upon HRM personnel to draw on resources that help link the skills to be learned with the delivery approach that best fits, while keeping in mind that workers/learners have various learning styles, which may need accommodation to planned approaches. Expanding the awareness of PLAR within the organization is also critical and may be accomplished through various approaches such as newsletters, e-mail bulletins, etc.

¹⁸ Nutter, P. *The Writing’s on the Wall—Implementing a Municipal Workforce Literacy Program: An Organizer’s Guide*, p.1.

Communication: An Essential Element of the Equation

A common theme underlying the various HRM functions relates to communications of many types. As noted in Linda Manning's presentation at the CAPLA 2006 conference, there may be barriers related to cultural differences and communication, adding yet another level of complexity to the PLAR/HRM linkage.¹⁹ What are the challenges and what is the potential of PLAR practices to alleviate some of those barriers? The concern has been given broader prominence by our provincial and federal governments, which have awarded research funds to explore the issue more fully.

In considering the various ways in which HRM and PLAR intersect, communication emerged as a fundamental theme. When defining 'communication' one may look at: communication styles or type (e.g., written, verbal) or vocabulary. In addition, there may be differences at various levels: organizational, professions, regional, provincial, national, international, and generational (e.g., Generation X or Y, the boomers, the net generation)²⁰.to name a few. It is also important to note that internationalization of organizations presents new dimensions, for example, related to participants' linguistic, cultural and social background. Even for those who self-identify as speakers of the language of the workforce, e.g., English-speaking, there are differences and variances in the cultural contexts and meanings associated with words and phrases.

Today's environment is increasingly multicultural. Globalization, advances in telecommunications and technologies, changing patterns of immigration, and increased travel have had broad impacts on our society and our workplaces. Employees have different social, linguistic, or cultural backgrounds. As noted previously, these can result in emerging needs and interests needing to be addressed by HRM personnel. And, as also noted, there are aspects of PLAR that will be of benefit in this regard.

Another interesting facet is the recognition that HRM personnel will be increasingly working with a geographically dispersed and mobile workforce. This may involve addressing the needs of a branch office in another location or preparing those who are moving abroad. There are

¹⁹ Manning, L., "PLAR-informally: The Cultural Dimension."

²⁰ Heathfield, S. M., "Managing Millennials: Eleven Tips for Managing Millennials."

also incoming employees or managers with different sets of expectations, communication styles, etc. As well, the re-orientation of individuals who have been abroad may require special consideration and support. For example, the worker coming back following a placement abroad may re-enter the Canadian workplace thinking that all would be as when s/he left; however, in the interim, there may have been changes, perhaps minor or potentially significant, from the perspective of the returnee. This affects not only the individuals but also their colleagues, employer, friends, customers or contacts. While many organizations have identified and put into place strategies to address these scenarios, there are organizations without the resources to do so or who are not even be aware of the phenomenon, with subsequent impacts to the employee, the organization and those surrounding both.

In a project led by Aline Germaine-Rutherford of the University of Ottawa—along with researchers from Ryerson University, Lakehead University, Seneca College, and the Institute for the Advancement of Teaching in Higher Education—work is being done with new faculty members [Canadian and new to Canada] to explore the different expectations, perceptions and needs others have of them as faculty and those they hold of their colleagues, students, and administration. In a Workplace Skills Initiative project, Linda Manning and her research team are looking into the potential barriers for immigrant employees who wish to advance in their careers once they are employed. Even in the early stages of this project, there has been strong, positive response from HRM partners in the project.

Professional Development for HRM Personnel Regarding PLAR

As indicated earlier in this document, it was noted in the HRM-PLAR sessions at the CAPLA 2006 conference session that the understanding of PLAR by HRM was limited. To address this need, it has been suggested that workplaces access the CAPLA training rosters for expert consulting and training, and encourage HR practitioners to continue their education with PLAR-related courses. On a similar note, expansion of courses and programs with PLAR content at postsecondary institutions should be strongly encouraged. Incorporating this type of content into educational curriculum again reflects a previously identified consideration: the need for acceptance of the concepts by the applicable accrediting bodies for the programs.

Significant strides have been taken in this regard, as evidenced not only by the increased adoption of PLAR for postsecondary credit at colleges and universities across our nation but also in the development of courses specific to PLAR itself. For example, Red River College offers courses and workshops on Foundations of PLAR and Portfolio development. Next steps include professional development within the postsecondary institutions themselves and the sector itself, and then broader application related to awarding of credit based on particular academic content. As Linda Manning identified in her presentation at the 2006 CAPLA conference, attention could be paid to supporting the development of e-portfolios, to document the learning record and to encourage self-encourage lifelong learning.²¹ With the emphasis on ongoing development to keep pace in today's society, these types of applications are becoming integral elements.

Summary

The linkage of PLAR and HRM offers significant benefits overall. There is strong potential for a significant return on investment in PLAR in HRM. This encompasses expansion of the workforce; increase in the workforce's self-esteem; building an inventory of talent; addressing anticipated skills shortages, and focusing future learning dollars on critical corporate competency development while eliminating duplicate spending on competencies already achieved. HRM and PLAR are inextricably linked. There is enormous potential and opportunity to benefit the individual, the employer, the organization, and our society.

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