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## **Making an HRD Domain: Identity work in an online professional community**

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**Published on:** 11 Jan 2019 - Human Resource Development International (Routledge)

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### Making an HRD Domain

**Citation for published version:**

Evans, P 2019, 'Making an HRD Domain: Identity work in an online professional community', *Human Resource Development International*, vol. 22, no. 2, pp. 116-139.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/13678868.2018.1564514>

**Digital Object Identifier (DOI):**

[10.1080/13678868.2018.1564514](https://doi.org/10.1080/13678868.2018.1564514)

**Link:**

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

**Document Version:**

Peer reviewed version

**Published In:**

Human Resource Development International

**Publisher Rights Statement:**

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<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13678868.2018.1564514>.

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This is an Author Accepted Manuscript (AAM) of:

Evans, P. (2019) " Making an HRD domain: identity work in an online professional community", *Human Resource Development International*, DOI: 10.1080/13678868.2018.1564514

Please cite the published article at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13678868.2018.1564514>

## **Making an HRD Domain: identity work in an online professional community<sup>1</sup>**

### **Abstract**

Defining Human Resource Development (HRD) as either a scholarly domain or field of practice is widely recognised as problematic. This article investigates how practitioners engage in processes of identity work to collectively construct definitions of the domain of HRD in two Twitter chat events. HRD is presented in these events as a highly individualised practice taking place within professional networks and is characterized as an ‘enterprising self-hood’. The enterprising-self strives to demonstrate professional competence within networks that provide affiliation and relational support in the experiences of becoming and being a professional. HRD is seen to be shaped by the demands of the knowledge economy and by emerging digital technologies. This determinist stance positions technology as a challenge for the practices of HRD and as a means for HRD to develop better, more effective practices. The participants in the chat events position themselves in contrast to an ‘other’ HRD that is slow, old fashioned and failing to effectively engage with new technologies. These Twitter chat events are presented as enactments of the future practices of HRD demonstrating ‘how a professional can practise’ against descriptions of how HRD professionals currently do practice.

### **Keywords**

Professional identity; social media; practice; professionalism; personal learning

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<sup>1</sup> The author would like to thank the two anonymous reviewers for their insightful and constructive feedback that helped to markedly improve this paper.

## Introduction

It is widely recognised that defining Human Resource Development (HRD) as either a scholarly domain or a field of practice is highly problematic (Lee, 2001; Gold *et al.*, 2010; McGuire, 2011; Stewart and Sambrook, 2012; Walton and Valentin, 2013; Russ-Eft, 2016). Ruona (2016) describes HRD as a domain that is broad, diverse, unstable and transdisciplinary and one that has historically been defined by practice rather than specific theoretical concepts (McGoldrick, Stewart and Watson, 2001). This orientation towards practice reflects that of Dirkx's statement that 'At the heart of the field of HRD ... is professional practice' (2008: 264) and that HRD research should be grounded in a 'narrative of practice' (2008: 266).

The instability of the domain of HRD has arguably been exacerbated by the shifts associated with the rise of post-industrial and knowledge-based economies (Corley and Eades, 2006; Francis, 2007; Lee, 2010; Kornelakis, 2014). Prominent characteristics of a post-industrial knowledge economy include precarious and unstable employment and increasingly complex labour markets (Tams and Arthur, 2010; Buscher, 2014). Developing personal skills and competencies to remain employable within the knowledge economy is increasingly expected of the individual worker. In such a context, professional learning becomes decoupled from organisation-centric and traditional HRD practices in preference for largely self-directed and self-organised networks and online learning communities (Castells, 2000; Sloep, 2014).

This article presents an analysis of two learning and development focused Twitter chat event communities where HRD practitioners engage in identity work in the context of a post-industrial economy. HRD is discursively defined in the events as a highly individualised and personalised practice taking place within digital networks and professional communities. The relational identity work (Sluss and Ashforth, 2007) performed in these events generates a framing of the professional practices of HRD in terms of an 'enterprising self-hood'. The enterprising-self strives to demonstrate personal competence (Vallas and Cummins, 2015) within networks that provide professional affiliation and relational support in the experiences of becoming and being a professional (Thompson, 2011). HRD is presented as being shaped by both the demands of the knowledge economy and by emerging digital technologies. This determinist stance positions technology as both a challenge for the practices of HRD and as a means for HRD to develop better and more valuable practices. The conceptualisation of an enterprising and adaptive HRD practitioner is enacted in the chat events by privileging the particular practices of personalised and self-directed learning enabled by digital technologies. The participants in the chat events position themselves in contrast to an 'other' HRD that is slow, old-fashioned and failing to effectively engage with new technologies. So these Twitter chat events are presented as enactments of the potential future practices of HRD demonstrating 'how a professional *can* practise' (Gold and Bratton, 2014: 401, emphasis added) against descriptions of how HRD professionals currently *do* practice.

## Assembling Human Resource Development

HRD as a professional domain and a field of scholarly enquiry is grounded in a 'narrative of practice' (Dirkx, 2008: 266) rather than in specific theoretical concepts and

principles or defined by institutional authorities (McGoldrick, Stewart and Watson, 2001; Dirkx, 2008; Reich and Hager, 2014; Lundgren *et al.*, 2017). As such, HRD is concerned with situated action involving interactions with other actors, specific operating procedures, organisational policies, physical settings, and other materials and technologies. As MacKenzie, Garavan and Carbery (2012: 354) argue, HRD is ‘a highly contested concept and that HRD practitioners operate in a complex and compromised context’.

Therefore, the professional knowledge of the HRD practitioner, as with most professional fields, should not be conceived in terms of a stable and external ‘body of knowledge’, a widely agreed set of resources and practices to be applied to a problem situation. Rather, such professional knowledge should be seen as inherently contested and contingent (Fenwick, Nerland and Jensen, 2012). The HRD domain continues to evolve by ‘drawing in’ an ever-increasing range of concepts such as lifelong learning, the psychological contract and employee engagement, reflecting changes in work contexts such as the expansion of the contract workforce (Lee, 2001; McGoldrick, Stewart and Watson, 2001; Beck, 2003; Callahan and De Davila, 2004; Kornelakis, 2014; Adams, 2015; Anderson, 2017b) and continuing pressure to present the value of HRD to organisational performance (Garavan, Gunnice and Morley, 2000; Corley and Eades, 2006; Gold and Bratton, 2014). What Keenoy (1999: 3) found in respect of human resource management can be applied to HRD as a domain that ‘does not even encompass a set of coherent managerial practices; it is merely a map of what has turned out to be an ever-expanding territory’. Coinciding with this territorial expansion has been a growing trend towards occupational fragmentation as individual practitioners shift towards increasingly specialised roles so undermining a broader occupational identity (Nerland and Karseth, 2015; Ruona, 2016) and, more specifically, further weakening the status of HRD as a profession (Gold and Bratton, 2014).

Generating a sense of coherence to the expanding territory of HRD includes a focus on the narrative justification for the linking of different fields of practice (Lee, 2010; Jorgensen and Henriksen, 2011). Hence, the scholarly analysis of HRD has been said to have taken a ‘linguistic turn’ (Francis, 2007) whereby, as Lawless, Sambrook, Garavan, and Valentin (2011) argue, the practice of HRD is constituted by dialogue between actors constructing inter-subjective meanings from that practice.

### ***Identity work in HRD***

The construction of professional identities involves discursive interpretations and presentations of everyday work experiences by individuals in interaction with one another. The social aspect of professional identity work implies treating certain actions, behaviours, and discourses as appropriate and legitimate (Ybema *et al.*, 2009). Conversely, other practices and discourses are identified as illegitimate in that professional domain. Therefore, the social construction of professional identities involves relations of power. In analysing these power relations, Foucault’s theories of discourse and power and, in particular, his notion of ‘governmentality’ appear particularly useful (Foucault, 1979; 1988). The co-production of HRD as a domain of professional practice is achieved and governed through the generation of discursive

regulatory regimes (Foucault, 1979). Van Leeuwen's (2008) semantic inventory of the treatment of actors in a discourse is useful here in terms of identifying a range of discursive practices and strategies that enrol, promote, other, suppress, objectify, assimilate or exclude actors and so framing identity work in terms of in-group and out-group categories (Thomas and Davies, 2005; Hiller, Mahlendorf and Weber, 2014). The discursive practices constructing differences and maintaining the boundaries of what is 'in' and what is 'out' are the direct enactments of power (Jones, Woodward and Marston, 2007).

Professional identities are constructed through discourses of inclusion and exclusion that validate claims of a particular professional identity within a professional community. So professional identities emerge through the production of disciplinary discursive frameworks within a community rather than as the property of a particular institution (Evetts, 2011). This perspective understands professional identity in terms of Social Identity Theory (Ashforth, Harrison and Corley, 2008) whereby identity work is co-produced as gatherings of actors formulate and reformulate the regulatory regimes that produce in-group and out-group categorisations.

However, as social fabrications, such regulatory regimes are continuously contested and subject to renegotiation and retranslation (Ybema *et al.*, 2009). The discourses of HRD are not independent descriptions of what constitutes professional practice but, instead, compete with one another to define the professional domain. Discursive regulatory regimes are not a 'muscular discourse' (Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003: 1167) that over-rides competing identity formations but are, rather, dynamically generated in the competition between different discursive constructs of the professional domain (Thomas and Davies, 2005; Lawless *et al.*, 2011). Hence the domain of HRD is unstable and highly contingent on the specific situation within which associated practices are taking place and being discussed in to being. This, in turn, creates the 'definitional angst' described by Ruona (2016: 553).

Key discourses that emerge from the examination of the Twitter chat events were analysed in relation to the generation of professional identities amongst the event participants. The identified dominant discourses concerned the effects of the knowledge economy and on technological determinism on the current and future professional practices of HRD.

### ***Framing HRD in a post-industrial reality***

Over the past few decades, the Northern hemisphere has seen profound changes through the shifts associated with becoming post-industrial economies (Warrington, 2008). These post-industrial economies have been labelled as the 'new capitalism' (Sennett, 2006); the 'weightless economy' (Quah, 1999); or the 'knowledge economy' (OECD, 1996). What is common across these various terms is the constitution of economic value as increasingly derived from ideas, intellect, 'know who' and 'know-how' (Spender, 2005) through the 'man [sic]-made brainpower industries' (Giarini and Malitza, 2015: 120). The knowledge economy emphasises ideas, skills, innovation, connectivity, and internationalisation and globalisation as the means of individual and national economic success (Stromquist and Monkman, 2014; Moisisio and Kangas, 2016).

## *A Knowledge Economy & Human Capital*

The concern in post-industrial economies with intangible assets, tacit and hard to pin down knowledge and competence places people, and their creative capacities at the centre of successful enterprises and regions (Clarke, 2001; Florida, 2002; European Commission, 2010). Therefore, human capital is placed at the heart of this new post-industrial capitalism. From this perspective, problems of economic growth, social inequalities, and environmental justice are translated into the concerns of education and skills policies (Simons and Masschelein, 2008) which, in turn, reframe a range of related issues including those of employability and professionalism.

The knowledge economy translates employability from being an issue of public policy, industrial strategy and organisational demand to one of individual talent, adaptability and personal knowledge and competence (Simons and Masschelein, 2008). This translation results in the privileging of individual commitment to lifelong learning (Clarke, 2001; Abildgaard and Nickelsen, 2013) and the non-routine cognitive knowledge work that generates the ideas, products, and services of the knowledge economy. This 'immaterial labour' is the preserve of distinct groups of professionals and knowledge workers including HRD practitioners. Hence professional and knowledge workers are seen to be individually responsible for developing and updating their professional knowledge, skills and competencies. The development of the skills and competence of such knowledge workers often occurs through informal, incidental and vicarious learning (Milligan *et al.*, 2015). This approach to learning depends on both self-reliance (Wesely, 2013) and connecting with wider knowledge-creating communities (Thompson, 2010). So, both professional identity and professional learning involve participating in professional communities.

This drive towards self-directed and self-regulated professional learning contributes to strengthening the position of employers in the labour market (Lewis, 2007). Lewis argues that employers are benefiting from the increasing numbers of skilled people entering the labour market at the same time that many jobs are being deskilled through routinisation and automation. Lewis goes on to predict an increased polarisation between those able to compete for highly skilled work and those for whom labour market opportunities are limited to lower-skilled, routinised and often service-orientated employment. Yet both knowledge and low-skilled workers face similar challenges of precariousness and vulnerability associated with part-time, fixed-term, temporary and on-demand work (Tams and Arthur, 2010; Cockayne, 2015).

### *Precariousness*

A characteristic of post-industrial economies is the vulnerability of the workforce across all occupational groupings. This vulnerability is driven by pressures of competition, individualisation and precariousness. Buscher (2014: 224) talks of a nomadic workforce 'trapped in mobility whether they are high earning professionals with bulimic work patterns or part of a new "precarariat" of low skilled manual and service jobs. The precariousness of employment among professional and knowledge workers places a premium on learning in complex problem situations (Margaryan, Littlejohn and Milligan, 2013) and the generation of novel and creative solutions (Sloep, 2014). This emphasis on complex and creative problem solving by professionals highlights the importance of inter-disciplinary working (Giarini and Malitza, 2015) which further

exacerbates the ambiguous and weakened identity and status of the HRD profession (Gold and Bratton, 2014; Ruona, 2016).

### *Professional identity and learning*

Alongside an increasing precariousness of employment, has been a destabilisation of professional institutions as both validators of professional competence (Nerland and Karseth, 2015) and as the bedrock of professional occupational identity (Evetts, 2011). As individualised and networked work contexts are increasingly prevalent, so externally imposed norms of conduct through professional institutions are replaced by self-regulation within an individual's own networks of accountability (Evetts, 2011). Professional online communities, including Twitter chat events, become sites of professional identity-making (Malcolm and Plowman, 2014). Such identity-making networks and communities involve participants making visible their learning to signal their personal employability and status as successful workers in the knowledge economy (Liu, 2004; Korunka *et al.*, 2015). As Tams and Arthur conclude, to maintain and enhance their position in the labour market, individual workers: 'need to engage in external networks and build personal connections that made knowledge transfer and new learning possible' (2010: 631).

Professionalism as an identity is retranslated in terms of the individual and relational behaviours of an 'enterprising self'. The enterprising self (du Gay, 1996) is a discursive construct associated that venerates the individual and their role within the discourse of the new capitalism. The notion of the enterprising-self presents a response to the dynamics of this post-industrial knowledge-based capitalism that privileges change, adaptability, mobility, meritocracy and individual responsibility amongst others (Chiapello and Fairclough, 2002: 188). This enterprising self strives to continuously demonstrate their value in the networks of her or his professional domain (Vallas and Cummins, 2015). Such networks provide both access to customer markets and employment opportunities (Storey, Salaman and Platman, 2005; Watson, 2012) as well as professional affiliation and relational support in the experiences of being a 'professional' (Thompson, 2011). This is achieved through the demonstration by individual participants of their expertise in the legitimated competences of a professional community (Thompson, 2010; Malcolm and Plowman, 2014). Therefore, the Twitter chat events are sites for the demonstration of the interaction between professional identity and professional learning (Gillen and Merchant, 2013).

### *Technological determinism*

The trends outlined above that shape the knowledge economy and its impacts on the labour market, professional identity and professional learning are entangled with discourses of technology and technological determinism. Technological determinism asserts that technological change is 'the' driving force of any social change (Potts, 2008). Despite significant criticisms of technological determinism (Potts, 2008; Wyatt, 2008; van Dijck, 2013; Stehr, 2018), it persists many accounts of organisational change (Wajcman, 2015) and more specifically in discussions on education and training (Selwyn, 2012; Gherardi and Miele, 2018; Stehr 2018). Technology is seen as shaping 'the social' and technological change is assumed to create 'progress'. The determinist discourses on technology as a shaper of HRD professional practice can be seen in a



range of practitioner reports and guidance (Couzins, 2012; Robert-Edomi, 2012; Daly and Overton, 2017). In a report on 'The New Learning Organisation', Daly and Overton (2017: 29) assert that 'Leaders who invest in driving learning opportunities via virtual environments are seeing significant results' with organisational change being shaped around the demands of existing and emerging digital technologies. In the practices of HRD, technological determinism can be seen in the discourses on personalised learning and on the technology-driven efficiencies of 'just-in-time' learning and performance support (Gee, 2003; Bingham and Conner, 2010).

Following Fenwick (2016), professional identity is generated through relations between practitioners and technologies in what Stoll *et al.*, (2006) term Professional Learning Communities (PLCs). PLCs assemble together people with digital network technologies to engage in professional identity-making (Stoll *et al.*, 2006). The discourses generated in the exchanges in these online digital networks seek to regulate what is counted as legitimate professional knowledge and knowing through the establishment of common discursive repertoires (Lawless *et al.*, 2011; Trehan and Rigg, 2011). Furthermore, within these PLCs, digital technologies are not only means of discussing professional practices but also embody or enact that practice (McInerney, 2009). As examples of PLCs, the Twitter chat events provide an opportunity to investigate the processes of discursive identity-making between HRD practitioners.

### **The research site**

The research site for this study is a series of synchronous online professionally-focused discussion events held on a regular basis on Twitter. There are a large number of these live chat events on Twitter covering a range of professional, health, recreational, or other specific community interests. These professionally-orientated live chat events include almost all professional domains from financial and business analysts to medical clinicians, teachers and information systems engineers, often with a particular niche focus such as industry sector, occupation, location or practices (Megele, 2014; Carpenter and Krutka, 2015; Evans 2014 & 2015; Ferguson and Wheat, 2015; McArthur and White, 2016; Wilson, 2016; Luo, Sickel and Cheng, 2017). For the purposes of this research, two established chat series were selected that focused on the domain of HRD and where the participants were HRD practitioners (Evans, 2014) and, for the purposes of anonymity (see the section in this article on Research Ethics), are labelled here as Chat A and Chat B.

This article investigates these Twitter chat events as examples of PLCs engaging in processes of identity work collectively constructing and regulating particular definitions of the domain of HRD. The investigation of practitioner interactions generates more natural presentations of theories-in-use in a manner that interviews, for example, may not be able to achieve (Warren Little, 2002). Rather, interviews and similar research 'genres' of discourse tend to repeat 'espoused' theories and examples of practices aligned with established professional knowledge and established expectations of practice (Czarniawska, 2016). Therefore, the aim of this article is to investigate how practitioners talk their profession into being.

Within the overall network generated by both chats event series, each individual chat event has a topic or theme such as learning and motivation, social media for learning,

empathy, creativity and learning, workplace happiness or using big data. The structure of the Twitter chat events involves a six-stage process moving from welcoming and topic setting questions through the main event discussions followed by general wrap-up questions asking what has been learned or what are participants going to be doing in the coming weeks (Evans, 2015). The role of the moderator or 'official' Twitter account is limited to tweeting the set topic questions but not otherwise engaging in activities that might be associated with the facilitation of online discussions (Evans, 2015). While there have been some changes to the operations of the Twitter platform since this data was collected including expansion of the character limit in a tweet and in the operation of the Twitter user timeline (Greenberg, 2016), these have not affected the format and function of the Twitter chat events.

The data of the research site was identified through the hashtag function of Twitter. The hashtag is a key mechanism in the generation of ad-hoc groupings by aggregating tweets that use a particular hashtag (Bruns and Moe, 2014). Tweets not using the relevant hashtag are not included in the chat event even where they are direct responses to an included tweet. The data collected include the event tweets, user mentions, additional hashtags and embedded images and GIFs<sup>2</sup>, blog posts that introduce and present the event topics; material from URLs included in tweets; and participant Twitter user-profiles. In total 12,063 tweets were collected over a three-month period in 2013 from 22 chat events between the two-chat series.

### ***Data analysis***

This article is an output from a larger research project that makes use of an interdisciplinary repertoire of research methods. The different research methods are drawn together as a case of what Nespore (1994) termed as a 'methods grid' to consist of both quantitative and qualitative research methods. However, the main data analysis presented in this article uses Fairclough's (2003) notion of orders of discourse involving (a) styles; (b) genre; and (c) discourse in Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). In particular, this approach sought to investigate how HRD is defined through privileging particular definitions and realities of the professional domain (Harman, 2012). Power relations, therefore, are manifested in how discourses shape, order, dominate, include and exclude different concepts and practices of HRD. Within the chat events can be seen the discursive production of a 'privileged version of things' (Marshak and Grant, 2008: S9).

Informed by Markham and Lindgren's (2012) 'network sensibility', the purpose of this analysis is not to provide a complete picture of the Twitter chat events but rather to surface patterns, dynamics and effects of potential interest to the issue of the active definition of HRD. In doing so, I am demoting other patterns and dynamics in the chat events to generate, at best, a partial sense of a complex and fluid phenomenon. Acknowledging this aspect of the research process necessarily foregrounds questions of the quality and credibility of the research approach.

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<sup>2</sup> Images using the Graphical Interchange Format.

### *Credibility in the research*

The non-representative intentions of this research problematises traditional notions of research quality couched in terms of validity and reliability. For the research methods used here, questions of research may be addressed through the credibility or trustworthiness of the use of theory, the research design, methods of data creation and processes of analysis (Anderson, 2017a). Research credibility is understood through the concept of ‘crystallisation’ (Ellingson, 2009) where credibility comes from building chains of evidence (Stewart, Gapp and Harwood, 2017). Credibility of research is achieved in transparent and ‘thick’, reflexive description of the research data presenting the research as ‘a complex journey of enriched discovery’ (Stewart, Gapp and Harwood, 2017: 1).

### *Research Ethics*

Researching the Twitter chat events raises a number of ethical issues specifically around a distinction between public and private spaces that does not necessarily continue to hold in the digital domain (AoIR, 2012). The research site is treated as taking place in a public space, and individual explicit consent for participation has not been sought although the event organisers were contacted to inform them of the research and provide an opportunity to raise objections (AoIR, 2012; Evans, 2014). However, a number of actions were taken to avoid participants being identifiable (Neuhaus and Webmoor, 2012). For example, participant Twitter names were altered and quotes from tweets, but not from online articles and other material, have been modified so that their authorship is less easily traced through search engines (Markham, 2012).

### **Performing a professional identity**

Key themes that emerge from the data are concerned firstly with enactments of professional identity in digital and networked contexts. These emphasise the importance of practitioner networks and the performance of professional competence afforded by newer technologies such as Twitter. Secondly, the chat events displayed a strong technological determinism in the construction of an HRD professional identity. Alternative discourses that challenge the subordination of current and future HRD practice to ideas of technological progress are suppressed through a combination of different discursive strategies. Finally, the professional identities generated in the chat events are consistently contrasted with an alternative, diminished and criticised ‘other’ HRD practice.

### ***The networked self and Personal Learning Environments***

Participants in the chat events frequently emphasise the importance of the individual in the context of digital networks as a focus of their professional identity and their professional learning. As in the excerpt presented in Table 1, these are often articulated in terms of particular artefacts and technological practices involving personal learning environments (PLEs) and Personal Learning Networks (PLNs). PLEs and PLNs mobilise social network sites such as Twitter to enable informal professional learning through online peer interaction (Luo, Sickel and Cheng, 2017).

### INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

Table 1 tweets 1, 2 and 6 emphasise the rising importance and co-dependence between the expansion of personal learning networks and social network technologies. The relationship between network and technology can be seen in the reference in tweet 1 to 2007 as the year Twitter was launched leading to the transformation of this participant's PLN. A techno-deterministic discourse on network formation and maintenance is present in the emphasis in tweet 2 on technologies alone driving personal network expansion. Tweets 3 and 4 focus on the importance of Twitter while tweet 6 highlights Facebook so positioning different social network sites (Boyd and Ellison 2007) as components of PLN. Additionally, most of the tweets in this excerpt use personal pronouns and assert how they have learned from their networks reinforcing the individual-centric nature of a PLN. The possessive pronouns asserting an individual ownership of 'their' specific PLN suggests part of the participants' personal professional identity is located in a networked context.

Furthermore, as this excerpt of tweets indicates, the chat events produce a normative expectation that being an effective professional learner involves the use of social network sites and assembling of a PLN. The 'problem' of practising ongoing and lifelong professional learning is translated into online networking and knowledge sharing and the stabilising notion of the PLN assembled by individual practitioners. Engaging with social network sites is presented as providing access to a great diversity of viewpoints, information and knowledge as expressed in tweets 2, 5, 6 and 7 while tweet 9 specifically states the benefits of such networks to improving ideas. Furthermore, tweet 8 in Table 1 asserts collective and benefits to engaging in social network sites while tweet 10 specifically frames such engagement as a mutual obligation. Thus, engaging in social networks to build a PLN is presented as part of the regulatory regime of becoming and being a professional. In turn, the creation of a PLN is an instantiation of the performances of learning, networking and the capacities for change associated with the self-programmable worker. The Twitter chat events also generate expectations that professionals explicitly engage in self-directed and ongoing learning as demonstrations of professional competence.

#### ***Working out loud***

The refrain of 'Working Out Loud' is a prominent one in the chat events and can be seen as an extension of an individual's PLN. Working Out Loud (WOL) (Bozarth, 2014; Stepper, 2015), also known as 'narrating your work' (Margaryan *et al.*, 2015), refers to making work visible to colleagues (Stepper, 2015) through practices of sharing regular updates on daily work activities (Margaryan *et al.*, 2015). Margaryan and colleagues (2015) cite the benefits of this approach in terms of promoting learning through reflection as well as demonstrating personal competence and capabilities by making expertise visible. Hence, WOL is a component of the generation of professional identity and the notion of a repertoire of skills, knowledge, and abilities that generate a professional domain such as that of HRD.

The chat events involve displays of employable value by demonstrating competences in professional practices, learning from others and demonstrating membership of appropriate professional communities. WOL is an enactment of the 'knowing how to know' (Edwards, 2010: 30) necessary for the self-programmable professionals of

Castells' (2000) network society. Hence, the chat events present work and learning as intimately entwined with one another.

**INSERT TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE**

In this excerpt of tweets (Table 2), the benefits from working out loud are articulated in terms of receiving direct feedback or relevant information (tweets 1, 2, 4, 6 and 9) and accessing a diversity of viewpoints (tweets 1, 4 and 10). All the tweets here discuss WOL as a mechanism for the participants' individual learning and tweets 1, 5 and 7 refer explicitly to 'learning out loud'. Tweet 3 recognises learning as being enmeshed with and in daily work activities. Therefore, learning is presented as a constant and relational professional practice rather than as an event-based practice. This tweet also notes the practice as a component of professional group identification as in, 'That's what *we* do ...' (emphasis added). WOL is presented in these chat events as a normative expectation of being an effective and business relevant HRD practitioner.

**INSERT TABLE 3 ABOUT HERE**

Table 3 is a short excerpt of tweets presenting WOL as a professional obligation (tweet 1), and as a practice that is modelled both in these Twitter chat events specifically (tweet 3) as well as in wider professional practice (tweet 2). The WOL refrain is an example of the capacity of social network technologies such as Twitter to generate regulatory regimes that identify legitimate practices within a professional domain and contribute to demonstrations of professional belonging.

The discourse on personalised and self-directed learning through PLNs and WOL are enmeshed with the use of new technologies, especially those labelled as social media. The definitions of the domain of HRD that are generated in these chat events are infused with technological determinist discourses.

***Technological Determinism***

In both of the chat events, digital technologies are presented as irrevocably entangled with HRD practice. Often, digital technologies are discussed in positive terms in respect of enhancing the professional and developmental activities of this group of practitioners.

**INSERT TABLE 4 ABOUT HERE**

In Table 4, tweet 1 asserts the benefits of technology for this individuals' learning. The statement: 'No matter how you slice it' makes it clear that this participant cannot perceive of any evidence or argument that would negate that positive assertion. Tweet 4 can be seen to be supporting tweet 1 in the implication that technology is essential to learning and that more technology must be a benefit leading to more learning. Tweet 3 suggests that HRD practices are shaped by technological changes as new practices emerge through the development of new technologies. Tweet 2 gives a specific example of the benefits of a particular technology and its effects on reaching more people. The reference here to conversations suggests the importance of sociability in online digital learning and that the effectiveness of webinars occurs through social learning rather than instructional models based on the transmission of content. Thus 'more people' can

be understood as pedagogically beneficial rather than as simply an increase in ‘broadcast reach’ (Owen, 2014).

In these events, technology is presented as an active agent in the development of practice. The following tweets from one of the chat events suggest different ways in which technology has shaped HRD practices.

#### **INSERT TABLE 5 ABOUT HERE**

Tweet 1 (Table 5) provides a clear example of the assumed causal relationship between technology and innovation in asserting that technology ‘naturally’ leads to innovation in professional practice. Similarly, tweet 7 asserts that technology makes learning ‘fun’ and that ‘fun’ learning is more effective learning. The notion of technology shaping professional practice is also asserted in tweet 2 where the HRD profession is rendered passive while agency resides with the technology in changing ‘how L&D works’. Tweet 5 also presents technological change as part of the context of HRD professional practice that has inevitably changed how learning takes place. Tweet 3 positions technology as a natural force and the role of the practitioner is to keep abreast of technological change so, again, technology is forcing changes in professional practice.

The perception of the irresistible nature of technological change is intensified by the brevity of each tweet to fit within the then 140-character limit of Twitter. Rather than specific examples of technology changing professional practices the tweets use vague terms such as ‘waves’, ‘game changers’ and ‘shaping’. This discursive style undermines any sense of practitioner agency and reinforces the assumption that the professional domain is necessarily subservient to technological change.

However, other tweets in Table 5 do suggest a more interactive relationship between technology and practice. Tweet 6 indicates a more ambiguous take on the relationship between HRD practice and technology. Here, technology drives learning in a way that allows for the design of better ‘learning events’ by HRD practitioners. In tweet 6 technology enhances rather than entirely shapes HRD practices and tweets 4, 8 and 9 also discuss technology as enabling beneficial changes in professional practice. In these latter tweets, technology and its effects are presented as solutions to weaknesses in ‘traditional’ HRD practices. Hence technology enables network, situated and social learning as a solution to the ‘problem’ of event-based practices such as classroom training or broadcast instruction.

Table 6 presents a further excerpt of tweets from the same event as Table 5 that emphasise professional skills and judgement over technology-driven solutions. This excerpt is made up of responses to a question on identifying the advantages of having technology drive learning practices (Q4).

#### **INSERT TABLE 6 ABOUT HERE**

Tweet 1 is a general comment on the position of technology in learning as being secondary to the processes of learning. Tweet 2 builds on the initial tweet to describe technology as driving the learning activities of the HRD practitioner as well as for others. Tweet 2 implies that HRD practitioners will be more advanced in their use of technology for learning than the learners would be. This is a common refrain in the chat events alongside a consistent but counter-discourse of HRD practitioners in general

lagging behind the demands of ‘their learners’. These two tweets also suggest an instrumentalist perspective on technology (Hamilton and Friesen, 2013) where technology is a passive and neutral tool of HRD practitioners to be assessed on the extent to which it accomplishes the intentions of those practitioners and the end-user learners.

Tweets 3 to 5 assert the importance of professional judgement and practices that make the most effective use of technologies in learning. In contrast to the tweets in Table 5, here we see the argument for the passivation of technology, and agency being ascribed to the HRD practitioner. It is the HRD professional who must adapt or shape technology to the needs of the (human) learners; she/he is the one who will make better use of network connectivities and do things that ‘matter’ with the technology. Tweet 6 suggests this practitioner is caught in a tension between their role of promoting technology for learning while also resisting the technology plans of their organisation and its management. So technology is a passive instrument of either this HRD practitioner or the organisation. Additionally, in tweet 7 the same participant warns against being seduced by the need for the latest technologies and that the HRD practitioner should be focused on the best solution to a problem or issue whether technology based or otherwise.

Overall, these chat events mobilise a discursive repertoire that identifies HRD professionals and practices as facing the challenge of relevance to organisations, and that technology is the main means of addressing that challenge. Yet, at the same time, the need for, and demanding pace of, such change is also attributed to technology. As a result, the potential directions for the development of the profession that are not subordinate to technological change are suppressed in the event discourses. In these events, the development of the HRD profession is discursively constrained by a particular construct of technological determinism.

### *Them and Us*

The Twitter chat events mobilise particular discursive styles that generate the sense of participating in a common professional endeavour. When discussing the profession and its practices the participants regularly used pronouns of ‘we’ and ‘us’.

#### INSERT TABLE 7 ABOUT HERE

A common discursive position adopted in both series of the Twitter chat events is to identify the event participants as a distinct group of people differentiated from various ‘others’. In the excerpt from one event presented in Table 7, tweets 1 and 5 situate the participants (‘we’) in the common endeavour of supporting learning. Pronouns are mobilised in these tweets to identify certain actors as removed from their concrete situations and presented as general, amorphous categories of actors that constrains their importance: an effect termed ‘genericisation’ (Van Leeuwen, 2008). For example, tweet 2 indicates the chat event participants to be distinct from the genericised learner who they claim possession over as ‘our learners’. Tweet 7 identifies an ambiguous ‘sm1’ (someone) that forces HRD practitioners to deliver training courses rather than solve business problems. Hence this ‘someone’ forces HRD practices to be less valued by employer organisations indicating the weaker status of the profession identified by Gold and Bratton (2014).

Tweet 3 positions the practitioner as distinct from the employing 'corporate' organisation. This tweet suggests an identification with personal professional networks that cross organisational boundaries and imply that professional identity is distinct from employment status. This is reinforced in tweets 5 and 6 in indicating that the chat participants value the porous boundary of the HRD professional domain. This may be expressed in terms of drawing in useful knowledge and practices from other domains of practice (tweet 6) or acknowledging the broader overlap with other professional domains (tweet 5).

### *Differentiation*

In these Twitter chat events, HRD practitioners who resist technological change and who do not adopt social media technologies in their HRD practices are identified negatively compared to the chat event participants. Also, particular well-established HRD practices may be identified as illegitimate within the context of the specific practitioner communities of these events. For example, the mention of the popular Kirkpatrick model of training evaluation generates responses such as 'can we have another question to keep us from wasting time [on] Kirkpatrick?' or are dismissed by reference to a drinking game: 'Tonight's drinking game "terms" Kirkpatrick and Level'. The 'game' here is based on 'buzzword bingo' so that at the mention of this model of training evaluation, the participants should (metaphorically) drink some alcohol. The effect of the game is to treat this particular model as useless as a means of evaluating training while highlighting its continued popularity among the sort of HRD practitioners that these chat events position as increasingly irrelevant to contemporary business realities. At another chat event, this drinking game was referred to as a 'secret glue' of the event community: the game acts as an in-group marker while othering those HRD practitioners that continue to use the Kirkpatrick model.

The processes of territorialisation of the chat event assemblage and of the domain of HRD tended towards 'restrictive' positions of what are not acceptable or legitimate practices. Furthermore, participants regularly identify themselves collectively as developing and enacting new HRD practices. For example, the participants' practices are contrasted with ideas of 'traditional' HRD through performances of such new ways of working as WOL and in the participants' use of social network technologies. As one participant stated on joining one of the chat events that they 'learned ... that there were others like me ... Not futzing around with learning objectives but making change'. Similarly, in [Table 2](#), tweet 3 asserts that a new way of working is '...what we do... All day' (emphasis added) and so suggests both a differentiation from those who continue with established, closed and less effective ways of working and an assertion that this differentiated identity is enacted in the Twitter chat events. Likewise, [Table 3](#), tweet 3 supports a previous tweet regarding opening up 'the conversation about what learning can be' with the affirmation 'as we are doing here'. While tweet 3 in [Table 5](#) states: 'Gotta stay ahead of the wave. TGFC (Thanks god for [Chat A])' implying that by being an active participant in these chat events they are better users of technology in learning than non-participants would be. So a key component of the discourses of differentiation by participants is in asserting that contributing to the events also involves enacting better practices in HRD.

These deviations from established practices of HRD are often highlighted in the chat events as positive sources of differentiation. The chat event participants regularly



discuss the events themselves as examples of how HRD practices should be: that the participants are performing HRD, to use Gold and Bratton's (2014: 401) phrase, 'how it should be practised'.

## **Discussion**

This article presents an investigation of how a group of practitioners co-create definitions of their professional domain of HRD. The professional identity work that is surfaced in these Twitter chat events is generated within self-selecting practitioner communities and is emergent, unstable and relational. Furthermore, this professional identity-work is shaped by discourses of the knowledge economy that characterise a professional status as being formed, maintained and made visible in online communities. An integration of individual and community orientations is articulated within the chat events under the themes of personal learning environments (PLEs), Personal Learning Networks (PLNs) and as 'Working Out Loud' (WOL).

PLEs, PLNs, and WOL use open and network technologies to link learners with materials and services to support their learning, enable the sharing and display of learning and competence, the receiving of feedback from others and the repurposing and adaptation of materials (Wilson et al., 2009; Kop, 2010). PLEs, PLNs, and WOL are, therefore, technological manifestations of a 'self-programmable' professional characterised by Castells (1996) as having a higher capacity for change through self-directed and self-regulated learning. The chat events idealise this self-programmable and self-directed learner as working and learning smoothly across diverse and complex networked contexts (Ribiere and Tuggle, 2010; Tams and Arthur, 2010; Donnelly, 2011; Scholz, 2013; Swart and Kinnie, 2014). Forming and engaging with PLEs and PLNs through WOL is presented in the chat events as an obligation of membership of these specific professional communities. Furthermore, the privileging of self-directed professional learning as an enterprising self-hood along with the integration of learning and working are framed as positive responses to changes in the labour market and the wider economy. So the enterprising self-hood enacted in these chat events involves both seeking opportunities for growth and development through network relations that also protect individuals against the precariousness and vulnerabilities associated with post-industrial capitalism (Brunila and Siivonen, 2016; Berglund, Lindgren and Packendorff, 2017).

The outcomes of the identity work of the chat events generate regulatory regimes that reinforce a subservience to the discourses of the 'new capitalism' and technological determinism. The opportunities for affiliation, relational support, and the validation of competences afforded by these professional communities are entangled in the chat events with notions of employability and professionalism with the availability of social network sites such as Twitter (Tams and Arthur, 2010; Thompson, 2010, 2011; Malcolm and Plowman, 2014; Vallas and Cummins, 2015). Seeking professional belonging and status are legitimated through the identity work of visibly engaging in knowledge sharing and demonstrations of competence in the chat events. Rather than being sites of intentional informal learning (Billett, 2002; Ellinger and Cseh, 2007; Megele, 2014), the Twitter chat events are understood as elements of individual networks of accountability (Evetts, 2011) and the 'taken for granted socialisation' (Livingstone, 1999: 2) of these HRD practitioners.

Furthermore, the participants present their practices in these chat events as prefigurative of how HRD can or should be practised (Gold and Bratton, 2014). As displays of knowledge-in-practice, WOL is a performance of the new forms of professionalism. Hence, the chat event participants emphasise where their practices deviate from established or traditional HRD practices (Evans, 2014). They also value opportunities to draw on the skills and knowledge of other professional domains to challenge traditional HRD practices. Hence the chat events amplify the notion of HRD as ‘an ever-expanding territory’ (Keenoy, 1999: 3) while the participants also seek to differentiate their identity as HRD practitioners from a genericised (Van Leeuwen, 2008) ‘other’ HRD practitioner.

The discourses surfaced in the chat event tend to promote these chat events as enactments of ‘how a professional can practise’ (Gold and Bratton, 2014) that is differentiated from the current practices of a weakened profession. The claim of these chat events is that established HRD practices are challenged, alternative practices are promoted and the sort of reflexive critique advocated by Gold and Bratton (2014) is practised.

## **Conclusion**

This article investigates how HRD practitioners generate distinct definitions of their professional domain of practice in interaction with one another in an open online environment. The article analyses how digital technologies are being used to generate sources of professional identity, legitimation and validation that are based on peer networks rather than institutionalised authority. The analysis surfaces the identity-work present in these Twitter chat events as responding to the demands of the new capitalism of the knowledge economy and the effects and possibilities presented by emerging new technologies in terms of an enterprising self-hood. In this article, the concept of the enterprising-self as a privileging of the individual is expanded to account for the role of networks. Rather than understanding networks only in terms of facilitating access to markets and employment opportunities (Storey, Salaman and Platman, 2005; Watson, 2012) this article argues that such networks are also the locus for collective professional identity-work. Professional networks and learning communities are where enterprising selves engage together in generating, maintaining and reformulating a distinct professional identity and, in this case, prefiguring how HRD can and should be practised.

This article presents some of the findings from a small-scale and exploratory study of these Twitter chat events. As such, the findings are based on a small proportion of HRD practitioners who are already attracted to and participating in these specific professional communities. It is likely that other professional communities and networks will generate other practices and outcomes of their situated identity work. However, this study does highlight the importance of emergent identity work and understanding how professional learning takes place ‘from the ground up’ (Wesely, 2013: 305) in the context of wider socio-economic trends. Furthermore, this article emphasises the importance of digital technologies in not only specifying the required skills and competencies for HRD practitioners but also in shaping how practitioners shape and generate professional identities.

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|     |   |
|-----|---|
| 1.  | My PLN now is nothing like 2007. Was local & F2F & now reaches across the globe and many areas of interest.                                       |
| 2.  | A4) Twitter addiction getting pretty out of hand. Also blogs, Google+, etc As I learn more my PLN expands & changes to go places I never imagined |
| 3.  | Q4 My favorite social channel for learning is Skype & have a fabulous PLN that mostly came from Twitter   |
| 4.  | I'm sure we all helped someone learn the value of Twitter #PLN  |
| 5.  | The most help I get is from people and platforms that are not really designed to help me  |
| 6.  | a4 Am constantly and accidentally learning from Facebook as getting exposed to perspectives I'd never consider on my own                          |
| 7.  | I remember the excitement of finding people that shared my career interests that I could learn from everyday                                      |
| 8.  | q4) Strengthen the network and you help the collective :) (remnants of #devlearn)   |
| 9.  | The network of ideas around your work makes your own idea stronger as well  |
| 10. | q6) I believe every1 is using or has used SOME in 1 form or another. I think ppl should be more active & contribute                               |

**Table 1: personal learning environment**

|     |  |
|-----|--|
| 1.  | Learn out loud benefits – ideas looked at from different viewpoints, learning different ways to do things changes your perspective |
| 2.  | A3 Learning out loud is awesome when you get feedback.   |
| 3.  | That's what we do... All day. But it beyond the tools. Its a new way of working. #workingoutloud                                   |
| 4.  | Even when teaching I learn so much from my students - learning out loud elevates the entire convo                                  |
| 5.  | Learning out loud is what the Internet is based on. If your 're the only one with an idea, if you go away the idea dies            |
| 6.  | exposed to info you weren't always looking for or knew of  |
| 7.  | show your work to make ideas stronger and sustainable  |
| 8.  | A3 learning out loud helps me find clarity and helps others know where I might need some help                                      |
| 9.  | Q3 BIG benefit to learning out loud - honest criticism of new ideas refines thought. – you can't be sensitive & must open to learn |
| 10. | Q4) Avoid the filter bubbles. SoMe is your opportunity to lrn from the world and to get off the beaten path                        |

**Table 2: Working Out Loud.**

|    |  |
|----|--|
| 1. | We lrn frm each other, we use tech to communicate w/each other. Texting and tweeting are bite sized learning.    |
| 2. | A2) Example how tech drives learning? This. I have access to all of yr creativity, now + most of time when I ask |
| 3. | RT @LearnLoc Open up the conversation about what learning can be. // Quite, as we are doing here!                |

**Table 3: Working Out Loud [2]**

|    |   |
|----|---|
| 1. | No matter how you slice it, technology has made my learning faster, more frequent, and more effective |
| 2. | Webinar tools have helped us reach more people, and as they evolve the conversations get better       |
| 3. | When new technology becomes available, it opens new doors of possibilities                            |
| 4. | As a learner... can I have more tech, please? #   |

**Table 4: My own learning**

|    |   |
|----|---|
| 1. | Tech is where we push out and do new things and at speed. In that sense it should bring innovation to all we do   |
| 2. | Tech will change how L&D works, whether we like it or not...  |
| 3. | Gotta stay ahead of the wave. TGFC (Thanks god for [Chat A])  |
| 4. | Tech enables learning to become a practice of networking, rather than unidirectional instruction  |
| 5. | Think social element of tech has been game changer for communication, doing things + therefore lrng   |
| 6. | Tech shld drive learning so that we take advantage of it & shape how we want it to be to make the best lrng events  |
| 7. | For me, tech injects fun. Making learning fun is the best kind of learning I want to create and digest.   |
| 8. | technology can take learning out of formal, abstract classroom & into real world of learner, where it counts  |
| 9. | socially collaborative technology will hugely impact on the rise of #SocialLearning and #leadership <a href="http://t.co/L7bSnZcQXm">http://t.co/L7bSnZcQXm</a> |

**Table 5: Technology shaping HRD practice**

|    |   |
|----|---|
| 1. | Q4) Tech can speed the adoption of knowledge. If tech doesn't make it easier for ppl to learn, it's just a noisemaker |
| 2. | Advances in technology require constant vigilance of our own learning, to say nothing of that for our audiences.      |
| 3. | keep on top of new tech - remember human element - adapt, adapt, adapt :)   |
| 4. | We've become better connected because of technology. How can we kick that up a notch?                                 |
| 5. | Q4 High expectations that the technology will deliver for us is a def con! it's what we do with it that matters       |
| 6. | I have to promote tech for learning AND reign in ridiculous tech plans at the same time.                              |
| 7. | People are looking for the clicky-clicky-bling-bling to impress others instead of solving problems.                   |

**Table 6: People and technology**

|    |   |
|----|---|
| 1. | Tech shld drive learning so that we take advantage of it & shape how we want it to be to make for best lrng events #  |
| 2. | A1 w/out tech many of us wouldn't have met. Imagine what it could/would do for our learners.                          |
| 3. | Rapid development tools help us get information out there faster in and out of the corporate world.                   |
| 4. | It pushes us to think about the learner...something often forgotten   |
| 5. | If we don't *borrow* from other domains we will suffer from inbred ideas. #   |
| 6. | Q2) Learning design and development is not something separate from other domains of design. We forget that sometimes. |
| 7. | Q2)...design is often ignored. We push trng that sm1 thinks we need instead of understanding real problem             |

**Table 7: group identity**