Prior Learning Narrative

Student Name

Walden University
I have been in human resources my entire career, starting as an administrative assistant, when I first arrived in the United States many years ago. I have taken classes, workshops, seminars and undergraduate course work. I am currently pursuing a B.S. Business Communications degree. I did not want to take another class in Human Resources as I wanted a degree in a subject that would complement my current knowledge and skills. When I became aware of the new course at Walden where I could gain course credits by writing an experiential learning portfolio, I thought this would be an excellent opportunity for me to demonstrate my prior learning. I believe the course HRMG 4202 – Human Resources Development and Change was a good choice for me as my current organization is going through tremendous change. The course description is as follows:

Growth and innovation are important aspects of all organizations. Companies’ success can be improved by providing an environment conducive to diversity and change. They must also provide the opportunity for employees to learn the goals and mission of the organization. In this course, students learn how to promote and maintain such an environment through the process of human resources development and organizational change, including training and development, leadership development, and performance improvement. Students engage in discussions, reflections, and group case studies, which focus on a variety of topics, such as learning principles, interventions, employee orientation and socialization, performance management and coaching, and diversity.

I began my human resources career as an administrative assistant at a branch office for a national insurance company. I reported to the Branch Manager, and part of my role was human
resources administration. I wanted to learn more about human resources and was selected by Human Resources management to attend training at the corporate office, which consisted of interviewing and selection, and general human resources policies and practices. The training provided a foundation for my career in Human Resources.

My career accelerated years later when I accepted a human resources generalist role with a California-based Workers’ Compensation Insurance Carrier. I took this position as I wanted mentorship from the Human Resources Director. Because the organization was growing rapidly, I immersed myself in recruitment. I developed expertise in selection and hiring for positions throughout the organization. With the fast organizational growth, the company began experiencing performance and turnover problems. We learned that supervisors had been promoted without necessary skills. We also lost newly hired and trained claims examiners to our competitors. I was promoted to an employee relations role to address these concerns. Sadly, my mentor left the organization after a year, and his successors did not align with the organization and both left within three months. I was ultimately promoted to Director of Human Resources. The company went through its initial public offering (IPO), during which time I learned the importance and rigor of due diligence. After California Workers’ Compensation deregulated, the company began downsizing. I became proficient in analyzing performance and other factors to identify staffing levels. I also learned how to develop exit strategies, prepare severance benefits packages and craft communications to exiting and remaining employees.

Since this experience, I have held progressively more responsible positions in human resources. In my current role, I am Director of Human Resources for a growing organization that has three locations (soon to be four) in three states. The company was acquired a year ago by an
international organization that is the leader in its field. I am now applying my prior learning to this role with the added benefit of having the Corporate and Divisional human resources infrastructure available to me.

Learning Outcomes

**Outcome 1: Critique the relationship between human resources development and organizational goals and strategies.**

I joined my current organization two and a half years ago, in August 2012. The company is a for-profit, three campus, Health Sciences University (ASU University) that was undergoing negotiations to be acquired by a global educational institution as well as preparing for regional accreditation. The Human Resources structure had been determined prior to my hire. Each campus was supported by a manager, who was responsible for Human Resources, as well as facilities and general administrative duties. I was recruited to lead human resources for the entire University. I made a lot of assumptions, and in many respects “learned the hard way”. In previous organizations I had the responsibility for compensation and benefits; this was not the case at ASU. I also learned that the human resources department in the University had little influence in academic hiring and performance management.

At the time I was hired, the human resources department provided fundamental administrative services. I was able to make some incremental improvements in hiring and selection processes and performance management, but for the most part, these improvements were on the “staff” side of the University. I also made strides to decouple facilities responsibilities from the human resources role.
PRIOR LEARNING NARRATIVE

When I was asked to lead a project team to write a new Faculty Employment Handbook, I was able to partner with academic leaders to develop policies and practices. Leading this project provided me with the opportunity to understand faculty needs, as well as to forge relationships with my faculty colleagues. The Handbook served as a resource for faculty, as well as protecting the ASU by communicating legally compliant policies. Years ago, I had worked as a consultant and had written many handbooks for many different organizations (non-profit, Insurance, Technology) and considered myself experienced in writing and implementing handbooks. Historically I have obtained legally-compliant handbook writing software, organized the handbook into sections and revised or wrote policies and then gained approval from leadership and rolled out to the community.

I learned valuable lessons from writing this handbook. First it was important to have subject-matter experts on the project team. We had several miss-starts and re-writes. Initially, we wanted one book for staff and faculty, but realized that was not feasible because there were too many differences. The framework was a matter of considerable debate. We questioned whether we wanted to produce a “skinny” book that just provided what was essential, or a “fat” book so that we could communicate faculty guidelines. We wanted to complete and communicate the handbook prior to the accreditor’s site visit. What was different about this handbook, than others I had written is the need to receive input from the academic community. Without their involvement, I would have experienced resistance, and the handbook would not be perceived as a valuable tool.

After many iterations and input from faculty, the handbook was complete. We were not able to launch prior to the accreditors site visit however. I am proud to say that after the

Comment [A5]: The student uses topic sentences to give the main idea of each paragraph. From this first sentence, readers know that the paragraph will be about the lessons learned.

Topic sentence tips are here: http://academicguides.waldenu.edu/writingcenter/paragraphs/topicsentences
University was acquired, the handbook was reviewed by the parent company’s legal team and published in September of last year. (Exhibit I - Core Faculty Employment Handbook Table of Contents). Because we had invited faculty and other stakeholders to participate in the policy development that was incorporated into the handbook, we had no resistance when we communicated the handbook. The information and guidelines contained in this document supported and reiterated the University’s core values which in turn support organizational goals and strategies.

**Outcome 2: Apply needs assessment in planning and developing HRD programs**

The Human Resources Department for ASU University is in its infancy. Although we realized that there is a need for a systematic approach to planning and developing Human Resources Development programs, our initial response was to prioritize our activities to make immediate impact.

As I mentioned in Outcome 1, there was a need for fundamental policies and procedures. The University had an outdated employment handbook and had many practices that were undocumented. Preparing the handbook enabled us to capture and document a number of policies in one repository.

The University did not have an objective performance evaluation system. It was my desire to automate the performance planning process, but as the organization would soon be acquired, and anticipated that we would adopt the parent company’s system therefore did not want to invest in an automated system. We were able to develop a new form for faculty and supported the roll-out with management and employee training. It was important that the tools we introduced supported the organization’s culture and that the measurements aligned with the
University’s core values. (Exhibit II – Core Faculty Performance Evaluation and Exhibit III – Faculty Evaluation Instructions). This form was used to develop performance goals and objectives for faculty as well as to provide feedback on their prior year’s performance. We gathered data from the reviews to help us determine how to respond with human resources programs and initiatives.

In November 2013, just over a year after I was hired, the University was acquired by a global educational institution. The parent company (ParCo) offered many enterprise human resources offerings. Our challenge was how to manage and communicate the integration. As the parent company did not have a “template”, I collaborated with ParCo’s Human Resources leadership to develop a project planning tool. We wanted to identify all the necessary components that needed to be considered to successfully introduce the Human Resources programs. (Exhibit IV – Acquisition template).

A year after the acquisition most ASU was fully integrated with ParCo. The organization’s needs were quite different at this stage of the organization’s life-cycle than when I joined. The University is experiencing growth that involves new programs and new campuses. The Executive Director of Human Resources and I were asked to develop a Human Resources Master Plan. (Exhibit V – ASU HR Master Plan). While we are both seasoned human resources practitioners, it was important for us to understand the University’s needs and to customize our plan in response to those needs.

We analyzed the University’s long range plan, results of an engagement survey and other data-points to evaluate H.R’s current situation. We prepared a master plan that we presented to our leadership team in January 2015. We want to supplement this plan by conducting a
readiness assessment (Exhibit VI – HR Readiness Index). The HR Readiness Index has been structured to gather information for each of the following Human Resources components:

Component I: Talent Planning, Acquisition and Onboarding
Component II: Learning and Development
Component III: Performance Management
Component IV: Service Delivery
Component V: Recognition, Rewards and Retention
Component VI: Human Resources Brand

One of the outcomes of the assessments we have been conducting since the acquisition is that the Human Resources Department structure and competencies needed to be strengthened in order for us to deliver our plan. The Society of Human Resources Management provides Human Resources competencies. We are using these competencies to develop our human resources team.

**Outcome 3: Evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of instructional methods in the design of a training program**

**Acculturation (Onboarding)**

Hiring a new employee is a huge expense to an organization, so the sooner they are able to fully perform, the better. Most organizations have an onboarding program. The best onboarding I have participated in was years ago in a hospital where I consulted. Because of accreditation requirements, the hospital offered a number of “in-service” training that each new employee had to complete. I have since strived to develop an onboarding program of this caliber.
PRIOR LEARNING NARRATIVE

I am a member of a workgroup that is developing an onboarding program for new employees. Our organization has many modules, SharePoint sites, logins and reference data, but there is not a centralized location. My colleagues and I learned that we should provide a tangible tool as a reference for new employees. As much as all of the content is available electronically (online), employee feedback reveals that an “old fashioned” binder as resource is appreciated (Exhibit VII – Employee Notebook). Many organizations find that effective onboarding programs require time and labor resources to implement and few provided robust onboarding programs.

Mentorship

Mentorship has been used to develop employees for many years. Typically you will see a junior or new employee partner with a more seasoned employee who navigates them through basic office procedures, organizational structure, and essential job duties. The arrangement can be formal or informal. I recently joined a Faculty Taskforce charged with developing a mentorship program. While we embrace the concept of mentorship, we are faced with several challenges. For instance, we learned that some individuals may not have either the subject matter expertise that is needed by the mentee or they may not be adept at the coaching and development skills that are required. We also learned that while someone may be willing to be a mentor, their workload and time demands were prohibitive. The group suggested that perhaps we could provide a more “a la carte” approach so we could match the mentee’s needs with a mentor who had the appropriate skills and competencies. Similarly to onboarding, time and labor resources need to be devoted to produce an effective mentorship program.

Seminars and Conferences
Most professionals attend seminars and conferences to remain current knowledge in their field. Typically these are expensive, and if the organization does not provide a budget, employees may have to find the fee themselves. Generally seminars and conferences will be hosted by a professional organization, and speakers are industry thought-leaders or experts. As well as keeping abreast of industry trends, seminars and conferences also provide networking opportunities for participants to communicate with their peers and forge professional relationships. I have participated in not only human resources seminars and conferences, but also benefited from being a member of higher-education human resources association that provides local, regional and national workshops and conferences. On one occasion, the speaker was an immigration attorney who specialized in immigration for higher-education institutions. Soon after the meeting, I was faced with a complex immigration question that I did not have the knowledge to handle. I was able to contact the attorney who answered my questions, free-of-charge.

Lectures

A lecture is typically a one-way instructional presentation. I frequently hear the term “death by PowerPoint”. Most people cringe if they have to attend a lecture. The benefits of a lecture, is that they usually accommodate a large number of attendees.

Recently one of my colleagues presented training for a new performance management software that we had implemented. An opportunity to celebrate using an online performance management system was missed. My colleague chose to “lecture” the audience (who are educators) instead of engaging them in an interactive workshop, providing them with “hands-on”
experience with the software. Not only did she fail to choose the correct learning method, but she also failed to appreciate her audience.

**Role-play**

There is a time and a place for using role-play as a training technique. I mentioned earlier, when I worked for the national insurance company, that I went to the Corporate Office to learn basic interviewing skills. The trainer had the participants role-play as interviewee and interviewer. The scenario seemed unnatural and forced, but to this day, I recall the lesson. I frequently practice role-playing conversations with managers when they anticipate a difficult conversation with an employee, such as a negative performance review or an exit meeting.

**Reference Manuals**

Reference manuals alone do not serve as a useful training technique. However, they have value for employees who are new in their role. If reference manuals are used as a supplement to on the job training and mentorship, they serve as an excellent resource. Smaller organizations will often have a more fluid approach to policies and procedures, but larger firms will typically have standardized processes. The insurance firm that I referenced earlier had a robust human resources manual that I referred to frequently when I encountered human resources situations.

**Skills training**

Skills training used to be held in a lab-type environment, with a room set up with a number of computers and an instructor. Today, most of us can improve our skills by participating in online modules. Many organizations offer basic skill training, such as word, excel or PowerPoint. Individuals who are “in transition” between jobs may find that their local
unemployment office or a temporary firm also offer a suite of skills training to improve their employability.

**Mandatory training**

My current organization requires our employees take mandatory training such as Code of Ethics, Harassment Prevention Training and Family Education Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA). I am currently working with the Legal Department to select a vendor to administer mandatory Drug and Alcohol training. Not only am I learning more about drug and alcohol issues, but also delivery of training modules.

**Coaching and development**

Most leaders provide coaching and development to their employees, but probably do not necessarily label their activity as coaching. I will often check-in with my manager when I am working on a project so that she can provide me with guidance or course correction if I am off-track. I have learned that by asking my employees to check in with me as they progress with their assignments, I am able to provide them with feedback along the way.

**Online training modules**

There is a wide-range of training modules that are available to learners. Online training modules can range from basic skills training, to leadership development, to learning different languages. Last year, we introduced a Learning Management Systems (LMS) that is offered by our corporate office. While I embrace the concept of online learning, I wanted to present the system with some pizazz. From previous experience, I have learned that while everyone is excited about an LMS, typically utilization is extremely small. Sadly my prediction was correct. I would have preferred to have a more systematic roll-out, where we could identify some
common themes or learnings that would align with our organization goals or core values. We are not holding managers or employees accountable for utilizing the education offerings and for this reason we are not maximizing its benefits.

**On the Job Training**

On the job training is probably the most utilized and oldest form of training. I do not currently hold an undergraduate degree, yet I have been in a senior leadership role in human resources for over twenty years. I have been mentored, I have taken certification courses, attended seminars and night-school, but for the most part, my learnings have been experiential. One of the down-sides to on the job training is that it may be trial-and-error, which may not be the most efficient way of learning. I can speak with experience that on the job training is a solid and proven training technique. Employers too may prefer a candidate with a formal education over an individual who has learned experientially.

**Stretch assignments**

A stretch assignment is when an individual is assigned a responsibility or project that they perceive is beyond their current skills and competencies. In my opinion, this is one of the hardest ways to learn, and probably the most useful. I know that I prefer to independently (this is supported by recent inventories I have taken with Walden University). Recently, I have been assigned as a member of different workgroups. While I did encounter anxiety and tension in these groups, the end products proved to be more complete than had I attempted them on my own. I have seen individuals accelerate their careers faster by participating in stretch assignments and challenging their personal status-quo.

**Certifications/Continuing Education**
Many professions (my own included) have certifications (voluntary or as a requirement). Some require proof of hours of continuing education, experiential learning or to re-take an examination. The certification for human resources has recently undergone a shift in that historically knowledge was measured. This year human resources professionals have the opportunity to follow a different track that values their business competencies. (Exhibit VIII – Nicola Martin SHRM – SCP Certification).

**Business Challenges**

I do not know of an organization that does not value learning and development, and I do not know of one that would report that they feel they are resourced appropriately in Learning and Development. My current organization has a shared Organization and Development department. They provide a Learning Management System, produce an Engagement Survey and other learning modules. As the department has limited resources, they rely on local human resources to roll-out their initiatives. Within the next two months, I will be attending a “train the trainer” to take the lead to conduct middle-management training.

Another challenge is how to measure the value of training. Feedback evaluations are rarely a valid measure of learning.

**Outcome 4: Explain how motivational factors affect performance at work.**

I believe, similar to McGregor’s Theory, (McGregor, 1960) that most individuals are motivated to perform well at work. However, there may be barriers to their success. If an employee is not afforded with appropriate guidelines, tools and technology, their performance will be impacted, no matter their motivation to perform well. Another barrier to employee
motivation is lack of clarification regarding the position responsibilities and fundamental processes.

I regularly conduct new employee interviews, and one of the questions that I ask is whether the employee has sufficient tools and technology to perform their job successfully. I recently met with our new receptionist. Not only had she not been provided with an organizational chart, an overview of the University’s programs, a tour of the office, but had not been given a headset. Mary was a highly motivated employee but was frustrated that she had not been given sufficient guidance and tools. Had I not intervened she may well have become disgruntled.

Frequently employees perceive that their success on the job is the responsibility of their management. My view is that each of us is responsible for owning career progression and training. However, it is the organization’s responsibility to define the appropriate knowledge skills and abilities (KSAs). If an individual does not possess the basic job requirements there will be a gap between what is expected and their capability to perform well. I have also observed that many organizations are guilty of promoting highly skilled individuals into leadership roles. While some individuals may have leadership abilities, and others can to develop leadership skills, I have observed that in many cases, there is a disconnect. Unfortunately, an individual who is miss-cast into a leadership role, can reap havoc. I am working through this problem at work. A weak leader in a department is causing high turnover and employee dissatisfaction in their department.

As basic as it sounds, we can consider Maslow’s (1943) hierarchy of needs. A basic needs such as salary, is a pacifier rather than a motivator. Higher level needs, that Maslow
describes as self-actualization, can be illustrated by providing workplace autonomy or taking on a challenging role. These examples provide engage and motivate employees.

**Outcome 5: Explain the roles of strategic planning in bringing about change through diagnostic and planned interventions**

**Organizational Long Range Plan**

My company has a long range plan that provides an over-arching plan for our organization. This document serves as a roadmap for all of the organization’s departments. My staff has aligned our Human Resources Master Plan with the long range plan.

**Workforce Planning**

Our long range plan predicts significant growth for our organization. The University is planning to add new programs, and later this year will be opening a new campus. We also have a number of individuals who are in key leadership positions who will soon be retiring. With this knowledge, it is important for us to develop succession plans and robust recruiting strategies to ensure a talented workforce. We have not yet developed, but will be preparing a roadmap for workforce planning that will include all of these factors. Recently I have come to learn that recruiting activities may be curtailed to some extent because of certain accreditor’s guidelines or requirements.

**Employee interviews**

One of the ways that I learn about employee concerns and needs is to conduct new employee interviews. I find that these interviews allow me to begin developing a relationship with the new employee. With that trust, they are more likely to reach out if they have issues. I am also able to learn about any concerns they may have with their position. A recent interview
provided me with feedback regarding a lack of procedures and process in a department. With that knowledge, I am able to partner with the department head to provide them with assistance.

(Exhibit IV – New Employee Interview)

Readiness Assessment

My department has prepared a readiness assessment (Exhibit VI – HR Readiness Index). The operations manager for the company had worked with other departments and provided a framework. As I had not conducted an assessment of this nature before, I was pleased to work with her and to learn another skill to my skills inventory. We have not yet begun the assessment, but I expect that the results will provide important information from which we can determine what activities we should work on.

Engagement Survey

While each University in our institution has their results from the Engagement Survey, our division will be taking a uniform approach in response. Our leadership has invested tremendous resources to the engagement survey and prides itself on transparency. The institution conducts the survey annually in an effort to “move the needle” with its employee’s engagement. This recent experience was the first time for me to be involved in a global undertaking of this nature.

Organizational Restructure

In support of the organization’s changing needs, it may be necessary to reorganize. Sometimes restructures are minor and others affect the bigger institution. Recently, one of the University’s departments underwent a restructure. I worked closely with their leadership to evaluate and redesign position descriptions and skills. Next we determined appropriate pay
grades for each of the new roles. All of the incumbent employees were given the opportunity to apply for any of the new jobs in the department or other vacant roles throughout the University. Some individuals decided to leave, some found suitable opportunities within the University and some applied for and were accepted for the new jobs in the department. The new structure has allowed for a better work-flow and efficiency.

**Outcome 6: Discuss the options and global trends in leadership training**

I am originally from England and came to the United States many years ago. I have been fortunate to live and work in the United States, but have also benefited from working for global organizations. When I first came to the United States, I worked for Zurich Insurance. While the division I worked for was Zurich-America, I remember that the CEO from Switzerland visited our small branch office in San Francisco. I was truly impressed that he spoke to us in an informal discussion in our work area. This meeting was in person, but today, I have many conversations with my colleagues from all over the world. Video conferencing and other technology allows for face-to-face communications and information sharing.

When I worked for a Japanese-owned bank in Los Angeles, I became acutely aware that there were cultural differences in the workplace. American human resources concepts were not familiar with the company’s leadership. I realized that unless I introduced some sexual harassment prevention training, there was potential for risk to the firm. I had already received one complaint. The harasser was completely dismayed that he was doing something wrong and wondered how he was to meet someone, if not at work. I was able to partner with a Japanese attorney who had published training materials in Japanese, specifically designed for firms such as mine. My management objected initially because I wanted the training to be conducted in

Comment [A14]: Why does this paragraph work?
It tells a complete story.

The student sets up the topic of cultural differences, gives evidence of those differences, explains the problem they could cause, and provides a solution to this problem. She concludes by reinforcing the significance of the events—in other words, her own learning.

When we talk about a paragraph’s story, we sometimes refer to the MEAL Plan as well. The MEAL Plan is simply a way to remember the components and structure of a paragraph.

M = main idea
E = evidence
A = analysis
L = lead-out

More on the MEAL Plan appears here:
http://academicguides.waldenu.edu/writingcenter/paragraphs/organization
Japanese. They felt that to acculturate in America, they should speak in English. It was not so much that I wanted the workshop expressed in Japanese, but the story telling would have lost a lot in translation. The training was a huge success. What I learned from this experience was to define the expected outcomes and then to customize the training to meet those needs.

I currently work for a global institution. Some of our training is USA centric, but other initiatives are global. I was recently involved in rolling out an engagement survey. I attended a three-day training session with individuals from all over the world. Many of my colleagues are multi-lingual, and all spoke English fluently. The organization chose a vendor that had the capability to manage a world-wide survey. By undertaking a survey we could tailor our training in response to the results we received. The vendor also provided the attendees with tools that we could share with our local management to develop action plans.

Sharing organizational culture among in a global institution is a huge undertaking. The company I work for has a strong value system and promotes a “healthy workplace” philosophy through our organization. We truly “walk the talk”. I am currently learning how to facilitate six module training initiative that supports Patrick Lencioni’s (2002) management principles. Our leadership believes that the foundation of a healthy organization is to be self-aware. I am looking forward to my self-developing in facilitating and supporting this this program.

**Conclusion**

I mentioned earlier in my paper that I was happy to join the California Workers’ Compensation Insurance Carrier because I wanted a mentor. Since then, I have been the most senior human resources professional in my firm. After my current University was purchased by a large global institution I am now part of a huge human resources network and report into layers
of human resources leaders. While I was somewhat concerned that my role would be diminished with the new reporting relationship, the opposite is true. The parent company provides centralized benefits, compensation, organizational development, payroll and talent acquisition. I am now able to be freed up to operate as a true human resources business partner to my University. My learning and development opportunities are endless.
References


Comment [A16]: The student includes a reference page for the sources she cited within the narrative.

Incorporating information from sources (such as books, journals, or trusted websites) is not required. However, it often helps to enrich the narrative.

For reference examples and formatting tips, see [http://academicguides.waldenu.edu/writingcenter/ap/a/references](http://academicguides.waldenu.edu/writingcenter/ap/a/references).