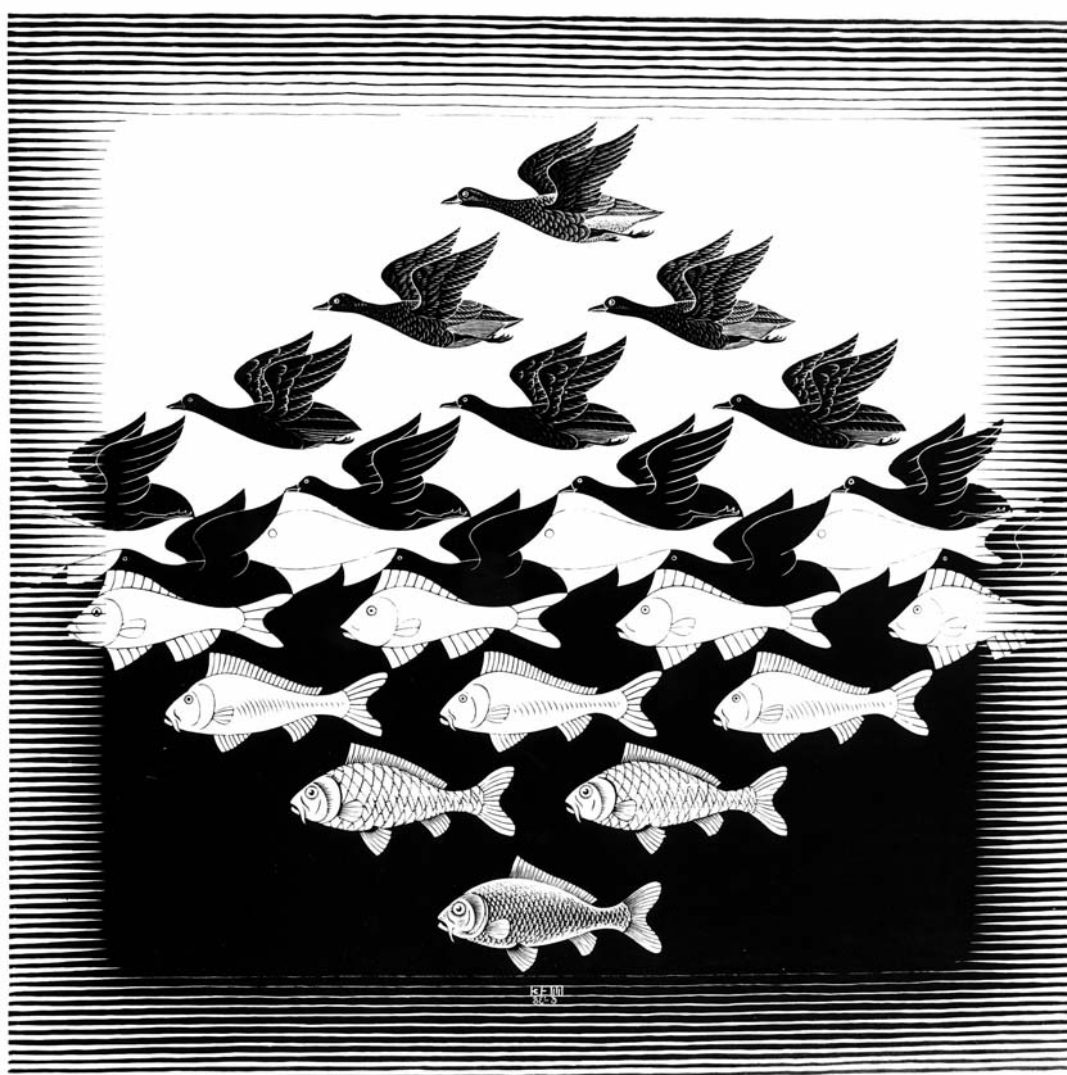# Learning to swim, learning to fly? A career in organisational development

V Garrow, S Varney

HR^N ies

LEARNING TO SWIM, LEARNING TO FLY?

A CAREER IN ORGANISATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

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Learning to Swim, Learning to Fly?
A career in organisational development

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Acknowledgements

Contents

Executive Summary

Organisational Development (OD) is currently much in demand in UK organisations across all sectors. Organisations continue to look for a broad range of skills from their OD practitioners, from organisation and process redesign, capability building, talent management and employee engagement to behavioural changes required for business transformation. There is, however, no recognised career path or standard qualification for practitioners. This report examines how people make their way in OD, what kinds of skills and experience they find most valuable and the routes they have taken to developing a top-level career.

We ask whether OD professionals are born or made. The answer of course is a bit of both. A broad range of operational experience, a good grasp of theory and a well-stocked tool-kit are all important basics but there is something too about an OD mindset. Successful OD practitioners are curious about people, intuitive about intangibles, willing to take risks, tolerant of ambiguity, have strong values and particularly want to make a difference in an organisation.

We asked practitioners what learning they would like to share with others wishing to develop a career in OD. Here is their advice:

- Get curious about OD and find out more:

  □ There is a wide variety of OD roles and contexts, and individuals work in different ways to influence an organisational system. Find out what people do, what tools they use and how they approach OD practice.

- Build another career first:

  □ OD is rarely a first career. Practitioners come from different educational and professional backgrounds, which all serve to enrich the discipline.

- Get some solid business experience:

□ All the practitioners in this report agreed that you need to understand what makes an enterprise function. Helping organisations become more effective requires an appreciation of how the whole system works and having hands-on experience of functional roles such as finance, sales, marketing and general line management helps to build valuable insight.

■ Believe in people:

□ OD is rooted in the behavioural sciences and if you are not curious about what makes people tick both as individuals and within their peer groups, then OD is probably not for you. At the same time some of our practitioners demonstrate a real belief that given the right opportunities and support, individuals can do remarkable things.

■ Get the right training and development:

□ An important similarity in all our OD practitioners is a hunger for learning and the ability to integrate seamlessly theory and practice. Masters-level qualifications often prove a key career transition point while the acquisition of tools and techniques along the way allows them to build a flexible repertoire and deepen their facilitation and consultancy skills.

■ Develop your self-awareness:

□ OD practitioners stress the importance of understanding the impact they have on other people as well as managing the impact other people have on them. At the same time they draw on their own life and business experience to enrich their contribution.

■ Hone your consultancy skills:

□ Consulting is a core skill for OD practitioners, whether they practise it as an internal or an external consultant. Having experience of both perspectives will broaden your experience even if you decide that one is better than the other.

■ Learn from others:

□ Practitioners learn from working with and watching more experienced people. In the absence of a formal professional body, OD networks also provide a source of learning and support.

■ Look for opportunities to work internationally:

□ Cultural understanding features prominently in the development of our senior practitioners, developing their awareness of organisational culture and also how to work with diversity.

- Prepare for the future:

    - OD practitioners need to flex with changing needs, business practices, technologies and so forth – and be willing to hold fast to their own moral compass. The new sciences have provided innovative metaphors and ways of thinking about organisations that can encourage creativity in organisation design and development.

Introduction

Overview: A real need for OD

Two years ago we suggested that there had been a resurgence of interest in OD in the UK. Our more recent sweep of the jobs market in October 2010 found that organisations are still looking for wide-ranging capabilities and support from OD professionals, particularly during change and in the aftermath of major change.

With the economic volatility of the last three years, which is only really beginning to hit the public sector now, it is not surprising that business leaders are recognising that business as usual is no longer an option. As they look to renew and restructure their organisations for greater effectiveness in changed, changing and challenging circumstances, there is a real need for people who have a deep understanding of organisational dynamics and who are skilled in working with the, often messy and unpredictable, business of organisational change.

Despite this need for OD professionals, it is difficult to find well-trodden career paths within OD. This can be frustrating for those seeking to develop a career in OD and perplexing for organisational leaders who are wondering how they might develop OD capability in their organisations.

This report builds on 'Fish or Bird? Perspectives on Organisational Development' to enquire further into developing an OD career. It offers insights into what it really means to be an OD professional and tackles practitioners on that difficult question: are OD practitioners born or made? It highlights how many paths are open to those seeking to develop a career in OD and shines a spotlight on the career journeys of three people with top OD jobs. Finally it offers practical advice gleaned from those who have done the job on how to develop a career in OD.

We believe it will be of interest to those wondering whether OD is for them, for those starting out on or developing an OD career, and those looking to buy or build OD capability in their organisations.

Our approach

We revisited many of those practitioners we spoke to in our last phase of research and invited them to dig deeper into their career histories in order to find out more about the paths they took, who and what influenced them along the way and any key transition points. We also asked them what learning they would like to share with others wishing to develop a career in OD.

In addition, we spoke with three people in top OD jobs to find out more about their personal career journeys.

We also reached out to the wider OD community through several on-line communities and other networks and invited them to share their insights through a survey. We asked what skills and personal qualities they had most relied on as OD practitioners and who had really influenced their thinking and their practice. We also invited them to highlight any skills and qualities that they felt would become more important to effective OD practice in the next five years.

Finally, we conducted another sweep of the OD jobs market two years on from our original work to find out what, if anything, had changed over that period.

IES Report 463

Fish or Bird? Perspectives on Organisational Development

Takes a contemporary look at OD practice in the UK from multiple perspectives and raises some of the key debates and tensions in the field.

ISBN 978 1 85184 411 1

About the Authors

Valerie Garrow …

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She leads the OD theme for the IES HR Network and has made a considerable contribution to the OD research agenda. She has recently set up her own consulting practice providing OD support for change and leadership using new approaches and theories.

Sharon Varney …

… is a consultant and researcher with several years' senior management experience in organisational development and learning in large, global organisations. Her expertise has been gained at the sharp end across a number of industry sectors: oil and gas; banking and finance; manufacturing and travel.

Sharon now runs her own organisational consulting practice, space for learning, helping business leaders, from many sectors, to develop organisational potential and effectiveness through their people. She is also undertaking a doctorate at Henley Business School, exploring how change leaders pursue organisational change in complex organisations – and what works, for whom, in what circumstances.

Part 1: Developing an OD Career

This section looks at developing an OD career. First it reviews what organisations are looking for in their OD professionals, with a sweep of the jobs market and a quick look at OD practice today. Then it reveals how successful practitioners have developed their careers and what they have learned along the way. Finally, it considers what qualities and skills have proved invaluable and highlights those things that OD professionals believe might prove even more important going forward.

1 What Organisations Are Looking For

Two years on from our earlier sweep of the jobs market, we conducted a similar exercise in October 2011 and found that organisations continue to offer a wide range of OD roles and expect candidates to bring a wealth of experience, qualities, skills and qualifications.

1.1 Areas of focus

We noticed that OD is now being commonly used as a broad banner to encompass a whole range of roles. Search online for 'organisational development jobs' and, as well as OD and change roles, you will likely find a range of learning and development jobs and even HR generalist positions.

We have suggested before that OD has been enjoying something of a revival in the UK (Garrow and Varney, 2009[1]). While this usage of the OD banner suggests to us that the OD label is continuing to gain acceptance, particularly within the HR community, we also wonder what it means for OD. There could be more optimistic and more sceptical explanations.

Being optimistic we might wonder if it means a greater understanding of the value of an OD mindset, OD practices and values in a wider range of roles. If so, this phenomenon might indicate early steps along the way of OD becoming a more distributed capability in organisations as well as a field of practice in its own right.

More sceptically, however, we might wonder whether it means anything other than a fashionable re-badging of roles to suggest a more strategic approach without any underlying change. After all, how many training roles got the 'learning' label without much fundamental change in approach? How many HR

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[1] Garrow V, Varney S (2009), 'What does OD do?', *People Management*, 4 June

generalist roles transformed to HR Business Partners without developing the skills of those within them?

Realistically, we expect that many roles might be caught under the banner of OD without any real change, but we hope that the acceptance of the label will encourage more people to explore what OD really is and how it can add value.

From the 39 roles advertised, organisations were looking for help with:

- Learning
  - □ organisational and life-long learning
- Capability building
  - □ enhanced leadership and management capability to achieve organisational objectives
  - □ greater HR capacity integrated more into the business
  - □ generalist HR functional support for projects
  - □ an approach to internal change management capability development
- Organisational effectiveness
  - □ strategies and approaches that help improve organisational effectiveness
  - □ maximising business unit performance and organisational growth
- Developing and managing talent
  - □ talent management frameworks, succession planning, retention, leadership development, leadership alignment and reward
- Managing change
  - □ transition through rationalisation and downsizing
  - □ managing change and achieving strategic objectives
  - □ delivery of all business change management activity
  - □ large-scale change
- Business improvement
  - □ process mapping and evaluation
  - □ frameworks to underpin transformational change
  - □ improvement processes

- Employee engagement

  □ staff motivation and engagement, performance management, branding, engagement and reward

- Communication

  □ internal and external communication

- Organisational design

  □ aligning structures and roles with organisational strategy

1.2 Experience required

In 2008 we identified a range of sought-after experience, which fell broadly under the headings of:

- Partnership and consultancy – working with multiple stakeholders

- OD/HR/L&D mix – talent, training, culture change, process improvement, coaching, performance management, facilitation, capability building

- Leadership – working/influencing at senior level

- Project management – project cycles, programme management

- Organisational experience – M&As, international/global, public service.

Table 1.1 shows the results of the job sweep in October 2011. For the 39 roles on offer all these types of experience are still highly relevant but the most common single requirement is for change experience, followed by sector-specific experience. The latter is interesting as our current research suggests that the most senior OD practitioners have enriched their own experience by working in a variety of sectors, industries and roles. This possibly reflects the current need for OD professionals to start to demonstrate that they can add value quickly during restructuring through an existing knowledge of the industry or sector. Experience of senior management, project management and consultancy are also valued.

Table 1.1: What organisations are asking for (October 2011)

Roles/sectors		Qualifications		Experience		Qualities/skills	
Job title							
Director	7	Degree	10	Managing change	15	Influencing	8
OD Manager	12	CIPD	9	Industry-specific	11	Analytical/problem-solving skills	8
Head of OD	5	Degree OD-related	3	Senior management	6	Strategic thinking	7

Roles/sectors		Qualifications		Experience		Qualities/skills	
Business Partner	2	MA Psychology	2	Project management	5	Able to deliver	6
OD specialist	6	MA Business	1	Consulting	5	Team working	5
Project Manager	2	MBA	1	Cross-cultural/ international	5	Sensitivity/cultural sensitivity	5
Consultants	5	**Other knowledge**		Employee engagement	4	HR knowledge	4
Sector		Six Sigma/LEAN	1	Talent management	4	Commercial/ customer focus	4
Private	31	TUPE	1	Delivering training	4	Personal effectiveness	4
Public	6	Workforce Planning	1	3 to 5 years	3	Leadership	3
Charity	2	MBTI	1	10 years OD	3	Define issues	3
		Prince 2	1	Coaching & mentoring	3	Initiative	3
				Working with partners	3	Politically astute	3
				Strategy formation	3	Stakeholder engagement	1
				Cost effectiveness	3	Resilience	1
				Employee relations	3	Suit style to organisation	1
				Generalist HR	2	Facilitation skills	1
				Reward and PM	2	Creativity	1
				Leading team	2		
				Public sector	2		
				Policy development	1		
				Service redesign	1		
				M&A	1		

1.3 Qualities, skills and qualifications required

Top qualities and skills asked for in person specifications are the ability to influence, analyse and solve problems, closely followed by a focus on delivery, team working and cultural sensitivity.

In our 2008 job sweep, for senior roles many organisations were asking for a post-graduate or masters-level qualification or a diploma in a relevant subject such as occupational psychology, organisational behaviour, design or change, psychology, human resource management (HRM) or business administration. This time 17 of our 39 jobs on offer ask for graduates (four at masters level), a further nine require

a CIPD qualification, and others are looking for specific expertise in Six Sigma and other improvement processes.

1.4 OD practice today

Our model of OD (Figure 1.1), developed during our last phase of research, suggests that practitioners are working across some very complex areas. Most are involved in some form of change designed to develop greater organisational effectiveness. They are required to establish partnerships with multiple stakeholders and take a 'whole system' perspective. In addition there are the tensions about 'how' they work, balancing the need to be business-focused with the humanistic values of OD as well as being both challenging and facilitative.

Figure 1.1: Current OD practice in the UK
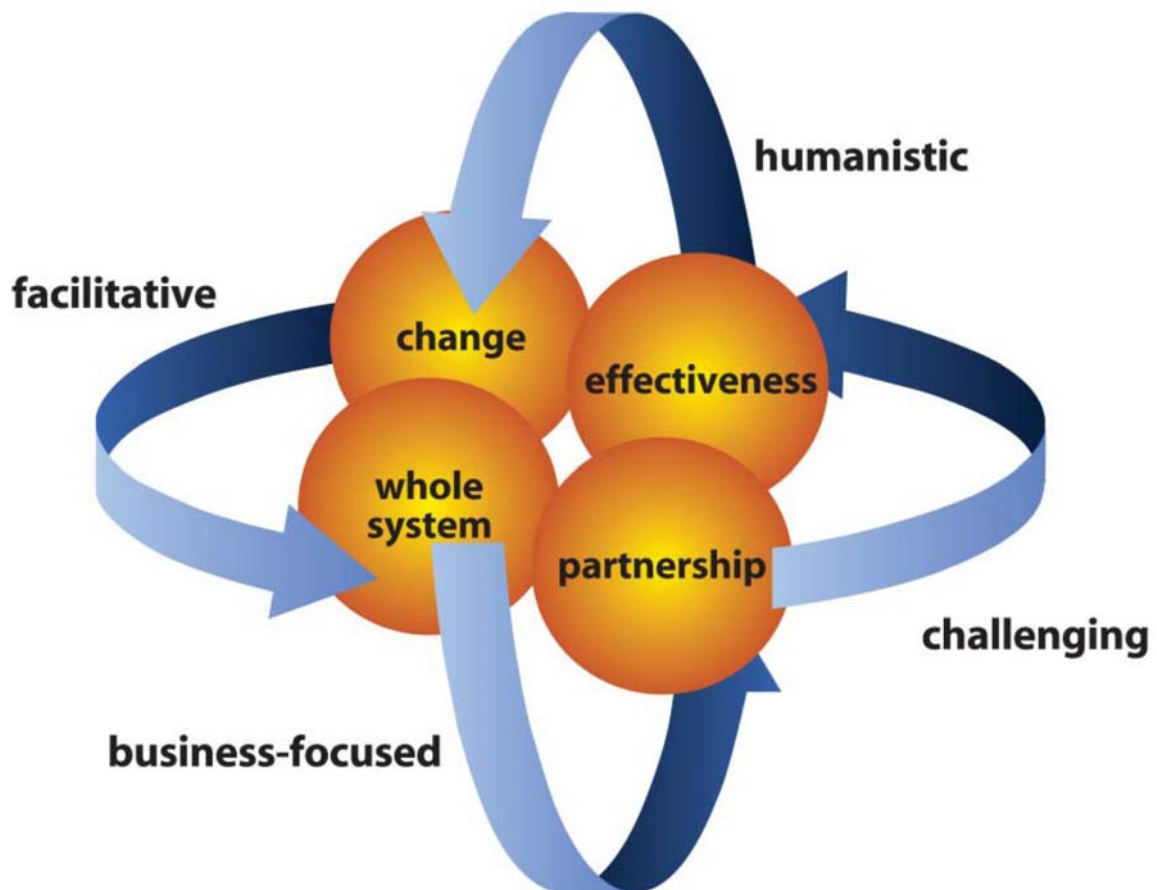
Source: Garrow, Varney and Lloyd (2009)

While in the early stages of their career, practitioners might focus on one area of OD, we wanted to understand how people start to gain wider influence in an organisation. Following on from our 'Fish or Bird' theme, we wanted to know how they move out of their element and begin to fly.

2 Developing An OD Career

2.1 Learn to swim, then learn to fly

If you think you might want a career in OD, the advice from many of our practitioners was to do something else first!

> *'If I was going to advise someone who wanted to become an OD consultant, I'd say become an accountant or something first… Never do it as your first career, always do it as your second.'*

Although it may seem counter-intuitive, according to our interviewees there are some very good reasons for making OD a second career. We heard that OD can be a challenging career choice and that professionals need a thorough grounding in business, combined with life skills, to help them develop the credibility to be operating at a senior level. So the advice was to treat it as a *'post-experience career'*.

> *'It's about having a broad understanding of business… combined with life skills. Having had some work business experience beforehand is a must. I don't see how you can be credible at a senior level without it.'*

In response to our questions about whether you can do OD at a more junior level, one person likened it to qualifying as a chartered accountant.

> *'Can you do OD at a more junior level? What would you be doing?… It's no different to someone who's doing data inputting in Finance being called an accountant. You're not an accountant because you do an accounts clerk job… I would say OD is like being a chartered accountant.'*

In OD, there is no chartership, so what can we learn about the 'qualification' process from those who have successfully developed a career in OD?

2.2 Learning to swim

We enquired into the career journeys of a number of OD professionals to find out how they began their careers.

David Stephenson, Group Head of OD at Royal Mail, first learned the ropes of people management in the Royal Navy, while Christine Lloyd, currently Global HR Director at UNICEF, qualified as a chartered company secretary. In fact, of all the people we spoke to, only Jerry Arnott, currently Director, Civil Service Learning, started his career in what might be seen as a related field: that of Personnel.

Among our group of interviewees, we found a variety of experiences. Two had finance backgrounds; one became a qualified Lloyd's broker. There were also some teachers: one 'almost' teacher, who dropped out of teacher training after two years because it wasn't for her; and two 'only just' teachers who tried it and quickly decided it wasn't the right career for them. As noted in our previous report on OD (Garrow, Varney & Lloyd, 2009[2]), we found that most of the participants in our research had had significant commercial or operational business experience.

This time, we dug deeper to find out what had been pivotal. For many, front-line management experience, often with large teams, was seen as providing an important grounding for their current OD practice. There were two reasons given for this. Firstly, being a front-line agent or manager and having to deliver day in day out was seen to provide grounded experience of getting results. Secondly, like David Stephenson, one of our featured case studies, others talked about the value of the experience of managing people.

'You really do have to get your head round and immerse yourself in people - how people are and what goes on and what are the things that make differences for better or worse.'

2.2.1 Swimming against the tide

Our interviewees talked about the importance of developing their self-awareness and resilience. We were reminded that OD work is not easy; 'sometimes it feels very uncomfortable, like I'm swimming against the tide' and therefore having to overcome something difficult can provide valuable experience:

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[2] Garrow V, Varney S, Lloyd C (2009), *Fish or Bird? Perspectives on Organisational Development (OD)*, IES Report 463

'I'd be very surprised if there's someone in OD who didn't have to overcome something quite difficult or be in a situation where you have to handle or deal with conflict.'

Whatever they did early on in their careers, our interviewees used that time to develop an important foundation of people, organisational and self-awareness.

2.3 Learning to fly

So what was it that really helped our interviewees learn to fly when it comes to OD? We found a number of key influences along the way.

2.3.1 Influence of people managers

Many of our interviewees talked about the profound influence that particular managers – both good and bad – had had on them. For one, her second manager was an inspiration, a former management development trainer who *'did **proper** development sessions with us'*, who involved and coached his team so they could learn for themselves the value of involving people and looking at the bigger picture.

'I never forgot what Pete had done. So I always started off by getting the team together and speaking to them about their development, about vision, really included them in that.'

Another practitioner explained that working in a marketing organisation where the founders showed integrity in their business dealings had helped him to develop his own ability to confront effectively and, on occasion, to take a stand that was congruent with his acknowledged *'humanistic bias'*.

We also heard that you can learn what **not** to do from your managers. One of our interviewees described working for three *'really bad managers'*, describing one as an *'anti role model'* but admitting that he was *'the most formative manager you ever had'*!

2.3.2 Influence of post-experience qualifications

Many of our interviewees spoke about the value of undertaking master's level degree programmes at key points in their careers. One person described his experience as *'a huge transition point'* which enabled him to really make sense of what he was experiencing and encouraged him to become more *'research minded'* and *'critically reflective'*. Another found her MSc *'much more useful in thinking about other approaches to organisations, such as complexity'*.

While our interviewees were keen to point out that the value does not come from the piece of paper, the reality is that many job advertisements for senior OD

professionals now ask for a post-graduate or masters-level qualification or diploma in a relevant subject such as: occupational psychology or organisational behaviour; organisational design or change; MBA; HRM or psychology. So having a master's degree can certainly be helpful in overcoming barriers to entry, and therefore necessary, although alone it may not be sufficient for success.

2.3.3 Influence of others in the OD community

As well as learning from direct managers and their own studies, we found that OD practitioners often value learning from each other. Many of the most useful connections were made within wider OD communities and networks. Some that were highlighted include practitioner development programmes, such as those at Roffey Park and Ashridge; professional networks such at ODiN (the OD Innovation Network); and the OD community at IES, which also funds OD research.

In our survey to the wider OD community, albeit largely UK-based, we asked practitioners if there was anyone who had really influenced their thinking and practice in OD. The following institutions were named by two or more people:

- Ashridge

- Lancaster University Management School

- Roffey Park Institute

- University of Hertfordshire (Complexity and Management Centre).

2.3.4 Influence of key thinkers

Many of our interviewees have read widely around the field of OD, as have those from the wider OD community who responded to our survey. The box below highlights those who were listed in our survey at least twice in response to the question: has there been anyone in the field of OD who has really influenced your thinking, or your practice?

It is interesting to note that many of those named have written about complexity. This may be a growing interest for those in the field of OD.

> **Influencers on current OD thinking and practice**
>
> Bill Isaacs (dialogue)
>
> Gareth Morgan (metaphor and images of organisation)
>
> Barry Oshry (power and leadership)

Edgar Schein (process consultation)

Peter Senge (systems thinking)

Patricia Shaw (conversation)

Ralph Stacey (complexity)

Margaret Wheatley (leadership and the new sciences)

2.4 Born or made?

In 'Fish or Bird? Perspectives on Organisational Development' we concluded that, while there is more than one way to develop an OD career, having an OD mindset is essential. So, can anyone develop an OD mindset?

For this study, we asked our interviewees whether they believed that OD practitioners were born or made. Their conclusions were mostly 'made' – but there needs to be something in you too. As you can see from the selection of quotations below, those we spoke to highlighted a feel for the intangibles, a sense of curiosity, a passion for learning, plus a certain set of values that fit with OD work and might make people gravitate towards an OD career.

> *'You see and feel things where sometimes other people just don't get it. We can smell the culture… I can just see it.'*

> *'There's a skillset… and that innate bit that means that you either fit to it or you don't. You can't make someone curious who's not.'*

> *'I've always had an interest in people… but if I think back to what I've learned over the years, I'd say 'made' because you never stop learning… and I don't ever want to stop learning.'*

> *'You gravitate towards careers that you have more talents with, by nature. You gravitate because you have skills and you value the outcomes of it… I had the skills to be a good recruitment consultant, but I didn't have the values to do it.'*

2.4.1 Why do people do OD?

As these quotations highlight, what motivates many people to do OD work is the personal satisfaction they feel from making a difference, rather than the recognition they receive for it.

'I want to make a difference – not so that people say, oh isn't she fantastic that she made a difference – I love being part of it and to feel something shift. Because in an LGI[3], a real-time strategic change event, at about 2 o'clock or 3 o'clock on the Thursday, you suddenly feel the whole room shift. There's something about that energy… that's amazing to me.'

'I've never sought 'high office'… it's all about making a difference at a personal level... If you're in OD you care about these things.'

'I genuinely believe that I can make a difference for the better, so I'm going to personally put myself on the line again and again.'

'OD is a bit like coaching – you can never take the credit for it. It's not about you. You definitely don't take credit for it.'

2.4.2 How can you know if OD is for you?

We asked practitioners whether you can know early on in your career if OD is for you. *'Yes'*, they said:

'As a comp and ben specialist[4] , I felt very different from my peers. The interest was always there – it just took a set of circumstances to spark it.'

'I think you would know. I suppose that people can go into it thinking that it's very mechanistic, but I think they'd come unstuck very quickly. Your emotions would tell you because you'd be getting some messages about I'm bored, I'm feeling really irritated with this.'

'The main thing is interest – and the other is the ability to see the bigger picture.'

'There was a lightbulb moment moving into OD. There was a moment when I thought, this is absolutely what I want to do. This is so interesting.'

However, they also pointed out that; *'being an OD professional is nothing like fulfilling a functional role'*. As we have reported before, OD roles tend not to be positions of authority, supported by a large functional team. Often they are positions of influence, highly dependent on the relationships between the individual practitioner and their clients. That said, practitioners also reminded us that OD is not 'one thing'; there are many perspectives on OD and many types of

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[3] Large Group Intervention

[4] Compensation and Benefits

OD role. When developing an OD career, it is therefore important to realise that some OD roles and organisations may provide a better fit than others.

2.4.3 Internal or external?

One of the key decisions for OD professionals is whether to work internally or externally. Our previous report drew attention to the debate about whether OD practitioners are more effective situated within or outside their client organisation. Some of the practitioners we interviewed then suggested that OD is best done within organisations in order to fully understand the culture, while others highlighted that many OD people are moving out of organisations to become independent consultants because *'you can't do it from within'*.

This time, with our focus on the development of OD careers, we discovered that many OD practitioners have spent some time working externally as consultants and we were interested to learn why they did so.

One practitioner explained that his motivation for becoming independent was to develop his OD practice and to give himself *'more space'* to do that. His many years working inside organisations helped him to *'feel independently competent and capable, really grounded'*. Another talked about her decision to move into an external OD role and explained that *'the job I'd had was a very big management job and I really wanted to get back into hands-on delivery'*. Another explained that the role had changed and he was *'now not getting a great deal of joy out of it'*.

Working internally within one organisation can bring constraints; the need to work with *'where that organisation is'* and what it needs does not always allow OD practitioners to develop their practice in areas that are important to them.

However, moving from an internal to an external role is not a one-way street. One of our interviewees explained that moving between internal and external roles had been *'a bit of a feature'* in her OD career and explained why:

> *'My career has sort of flip-flopped constantly between big management jobs, being in big organisations, and self-employment and consultancy and the actual delivery of development. I like being in big organisations. But equally I like challenge and variety.'*

> *'But the problem being in big organisations is it's fine for a bit and then I get bored.'*

> *'The first year in a new job I think is fantastically interesting… The second year is also fine, but I'm doing everything for a second time, but improving on what I did the first time. Then in the third year… you've done it.'*

'It depends on the task and the scale of the challenges affecting the organisation at that time, but my impression is that you can go in and see things that need changing, or things that need developing and you can get on and do them. Then there comes a point at which you hit a solid bedrock of what that organisation is about and probably what has enabled that organisation to survive and succeed. And, unless there's a very good reason for changing it, then it probably isn't going to change. And that's when you think, well what do I do next? If a new challenge comes along and the organisation needs to respond to something, then you're back in the cycle again.'

From our own experience, we would suggest that each type of role (internal and external) has it own advantages and disadvantages and each serves to build different kinds of experience. However, what we have found is that strong partnerships and trusting relationships between internal and external OD practitioners can be extremely fruitful as they bring different perspectives and combinations of skills.

3 Key Qualities And Skills

3.1 What practitioners have found most valuable

What experience do you need to gain along the way? We asked our interviewees and those completing the survey to look back over their careers and to tell us what qualities and skills they have relied upon most as OD practitioners.

We discovered that their responses fell into four broad categories:

- **thinking:** how people think about what they do

- **doing:** the skills people use

- **relating:** how people relate to others

- **being:** personal attributes and qualities.

Figure 3.1 highlights a selection of qualities and skills from our survey, grouped under these four broad headings.

3.1.1 Thinking

When we look at the examples that we have grouped together under the broad category of thinking, we can see a number of themes. There are some key **knowledge** areas, particularly business knowledge and understanding of social dynamics. There are also **analytical skills**, such as hypothesising and interpreting. One thing that often characterises OD work is the way that practitioners **stay open** to a variety of models, frameworks, theories and ways of working. Mee-Yan Cheung Judge has suggested that OD is a 'magpie' discipline[5]. However, what

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[5]   OD Masterclass with Mee-Yan Cheung Judge, Roffey Park Institute, May 2007

often characterises OD work is a **connectionist way of thinking** that seeks to understand the relationships between phenomena. This is often expressed in terms like 'strategic thinking', 'systems thinking' and 'big picture thinking'.

3.1.2 Doing

Again there are some key themes within this group. There are **interpersonal** skills such as rapport building, influencing and challenging compassionately. There are **communication** skills such as listening, questioning and messaging appropriately. There are also intervention skills such as facilitation and coaching.

3.1.3 Relating

OD cannot be packaged up and delivered to or for clients. The ways that practitioners work with and relate to others is central to their effectiveness. Here we have highlighted a number of skills and qualities related to **networking**, **relationship building** and **consulting**.

3.1.4 Being

The 'self' is often considered to be instrumental in OD practice (Cheung-Judge, 2001[6]), so personal qualities are also vital. Practitioners we spoke to tended to talk about those personal qualities as life skills, which can be nurtured and developed provided you are open to doing that, rather than innate qualities you either have or don't have.

3.1.5 Weaving it all together

A typology of this nature draws attention to the different types of qualities and skills that are important in OD practice. It is designed to simplify. However, we should be wary of being too simplistic and producing a checklist. Practitioners explained that their skills, qualities and experiences all weave together in practice.

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[6]   Cheung Judge, M Y (2001), 'The self as an instrument: a cornerstone for the future of OD', *OD Network*, Vol. 33, No. 3, pp. 11-16

Figure 3.1: Key qualities and skills

Thinking			Doing		
Making conceptual connections and understanding 'systems' (x 4)	Systemic framework for understanding organisations	Ability to see patterns	Facilitation skills (x 4)	Listening skills (x 7)	Interpersonal skills and rapport building (x 2)
My professional training as a psychologist – see the world through a psychology lens	Exploring complexity theory	Knowledge of the complex social dynamics of organisation (x 2)	Writing	Presenting abstract information many ways for different styles (x 2)	Using metaphor to capture the complexity of what's going on
Psychoanalytic framework for understanding organisations	OD as systemic change – systems internal and external to the organisation	Understanding of organisational processes and dynamics	Coaching skills (x 4)	Influencing (x 3)	Communications skills, messaging in the most appropriate way
Not having fixed models and frameworks	Drawing widely from different sources and experiences	Keeping an open mind	Asking good questions (x 3)	Asking the simplest questions that people don't want to answer	Conversation
Ability to see the big picture and make connections	My MBA – and the organisational behaviour bits of it	Strategic intelligence	Large group interventions (x 2)	Ability to make things happen – realistic and practical, not overly theoretical	Drawing out people's strengths
Taking a strategic perspective and a pragmatic approach to supporting change	Interpretive skills	Hypothesising	Using multiple intervention (formal/informal) to achieve change	Monitoring effectiveness of change	Challenging compassionately
Placing all interventions in a business context, ie not OD for OD's sake	Business strategy links and systems thinking	Understanding of personal, team, organisational levels	Working with whole system change	Intervention skills	Challenging taken-for-granted assumptions

Relating			Being		
Building relationships (x 4)	Networking skills (x 7)	Engagement of peers and wider audience	Self-awareness (x 4)	Unending curiosity (x 2)	Emotional intelligence
Collaboration	Making personal connections with clients and stakeholders	Checking understanding of issues with client	Patience	Intuition (x 2)	Flexibility – there are many ways to achieve something (x 3)
Consulting skills honed over 25 years	Starting where the client is	Contact skills	Personal presence	Integrity	Respect
Working across professional, team and organisational boundaries	Relationship building and engagement across networks	Ability to work through others	Courage	Humour	Trust
Requirements gathering	Ability to help others sift the wheat from the chaff	Ability to connect ideas and people	Energy – there are always problems along the way	Persistence (x 2)	Emotional resilience (x 2)
Reframing	Political awareness	Being approachable and discreet	Ability to stay centred/grounded in the midst of everything	Mindfulness	Being responsive
Spotting what is not being said which gives a clue to real issues	Capacity to engage in the moment and trust own judgement	Sensing the dynamics of the situation	Being authentic	Working with ambiguity	Sensitivity to dynamics of change

Source: IES, 2010

3.2 Moving forward

While OD has a rich history, we firmly believe that OD has an even bigger opportunity going forwards in terms of contributing to organisational effectiveness in changed, changing and challenging circumstances. So we also asked practitioners to think about whether there were any qualities and skills that they felt might become even more important to effective OD practice in the next five years.

Figure 3.2 illustrates what they had to say on the subject. We have grouped the comments to help you quickly see key themes, but have kept the original wording as we felt that the nuances were important too.

Figure 3.2: Key qualities and skills for the future

Utilising networks

- Use of informal interventions and networks to build energy for change

- Working in loose networked alliances

- Social network analysis

- Connecting people and talents for organisational/system benefit

- Seeing OD primarily as a relational practice

Working with uncertainty

- Comfort with uncertainty and emergence

- Working reflexively, emergently, living in the moment (non programmatically)

- Working with uncertainty, eg supporting organisations (people) as their working practices and the traditional view of 'a job' continue to evolve

- Being able to stay in uncertainty/ambiguity/not knowing... and yet speak

Understanding complexity

- Dealing with a complex system

- A proper understanding of the complex social dynamics of organisations

- Chaordic practice

- Understanding complexity

- Working with Beinhocker's[7] (1997) ideas

Business awareness and skills

- Depth of understanding of the business

- Commercial awareness

- Building a clear business case, ie practical application of OD interventions

- Starting all interventions from a consideration of the 'business' context, ie not technique-oriented

- The articulation to the line and senior management of the need for and impact of OD methods in terms they recognise and 'buy'

- Clarity of purpose, why OD is always important (not a nice to have)

- Linking OD to business performance

- Increased financial and market strategy skills

- Data analytics

- Results-orientation

- Evaluation

- Political awareness

Working internationally

- Ability to work across national boundaries

- Working with organisational systems across fragmented global organisations

- Understanding emerging markets', rather than having a western mindset

- Working cross-culturally

- Communications (intercultural)

- Cross-cultural change – and how cultures overlap and diverge

Working virtually

- Ability to be creative about working with global virtual world rather than face to face

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[7]   Bienhocker E D (1997), 'Strategy at the edge of chaos', *The McKinsey Quarterly*, No. 1

- Virtual technologies

- Ability to use technology to diagnose and intervene

Communication skills

- Ability to capture attention

- Storytelling

- Conversation and narrative as the primary 'tools' of organisational leadership – and hence OD practice

Challenging assumptions

- Challenging assumptions – including those that inform conventional management AND OD practice

- Capacity to radically challenge assumptions and habitual ways of thinking

Dealing with conflict

- Dealing with conflict

- Conflict management – allowing conflict and helping people deal with it effectively

Intervention skills

- Action Learning

- Facilitation – working with the tangible and intangible aspects of groups

- Working holistically with people – including the body, for example, currently often completely ignored in this work.

Working with large groups

- Large systems change

- Systemic team coaching

- Designing and facilitating large group processes

Working with a MUCH bigger picture

- Helping clients develop a holistic and integral view of issues

- Systemic approaches – enabling organisations and their people to envisage what is possible from working together – and take action

- Ability to help leaders face and accept huge paradigm shifts, eg climate change

- Ways of bringing humanity and meaning to organisations

- Practitioner's ability to see the Big Picture

- Long-term planning

- Commitment to/involvement with communities that address the bigger questions of our society/life

- Awareness of sustainability as compelling agenda

Developing yourself as an instrument

- Trust, credibility and authenticity of practitioners

- Subtlety

- Self-care – cultivating the kind of strength and openness that comes from really looking after self well

- Psychological understanding and self-awareness

- Reflective practice about the helping relationship

Flexibility and responsiveness

- Adapting to challenging economic times – flexing your programmes accordingly

- Flexibility and innovation

- Responsiveness to change

- Change at pace

Sticking with it

- Persistence

- Tenacity, sticking with it through difficult times

- Resilience in the face of complexity and paradox

- Tolerance

Exploring alternative approaches

- Willingness to explore other 'non-OD' thinking to develop leadership and OD practice

- Knowledge of alternative (extended) epistemologies

- Environmental scanning

Source: IES Survey, 2010

Part 2: The Career Stories

The next section profiles three in-depth career stories that feature very senior OD practitioners and looks at how they have built up their expertise and experience. They can be read as a whole or by selecting some of the key themes using the symbols below, which focus on skill building, insights and learning:

+   where they have acquired new skills

♟♙   where they provide particular insights

📖   formal learning

⇨   turning points in thinking or practice

Following the three full case stories, there is a synthesis of common themes that provides further insight into developing an OD career at senior level.

4 Career Story: Jerry Arnott

Looking back on his career, Jerry sees his core profession firmly rooted in learning and development, although this has inevitably led him into organisational development in a wide range of industries and roles. Now approaching his last corporate role, as Director, Civil Service Learning, he is less sure than he was five years ago about whether he would call himself an OD professional. Nevertheless, his career path reveals a lot about building OD skills and experience.

4.1 Education

Jerry's career path started with his first degree at Aston University in the 70s in Behavioural Science, which was the first of its kind in the UK and a forerunner of OD (the label had only just come over from the States). Throughout his career he feels he has drawn on what he studied there: disciplines of sociology; psychology; economics; philosophy; history and so on. From this initial foundation he has continued to integrate theory and practice to develop individuals and organisations.

4.2 Engineering

4.2.1 Personnel

His first role as a graduate was in personnel for an engineering firm in the Midlands and it was here that he got an early experience of training. He was drawn to it as the area of the people agenda he wanted to spend time in and became a junior assistant training officer.

4.3 Granada

4.3.1 Management development

The journey into OD started in his second job at Granada in the early 80s when he was asked to help out with a management development programme across the retail group.

📨 Jerry took the first crossroads career decision at Granada when asked to move into a generalist personnel role. By this time, however, he already had the taste for management development and wanted to specialise.

4.4 Lex Service Group

4.4.1 Development consultant

He was offered a role as a management development consultant with LEX, an international group and spent the following three years in Banbury where they had a development centre. Working with people more experienced than himself, he was able to learn quickly and absorbed everything around him.

➕ *'These were very formative years learning all about the world of design and delivery of development interventions but also learning to be a consultant. I had a dual role as consultant to some of the businesses and designing and delivering programmes.'*

📖 Jerry got the first real taste of OD at this time, with quite a bit of academic input from Chris Argyris, Richard Beckhard and others. He began to get an intellectual sense of the broader agenda – *that it was not just managers but organisations as well*.

4.4.2 US experience

Then came the opportunity with LEX to go to the States, where they had a large electronics distribution business in the mid 80s. His task was to set up a training and development organisation for LEX in the US. Here he was exposed to a different culture and worked nationwide.

During this time he was very connected with the world of OD in the States, where there was a lot going on, largely driven by Schein, Argyris and Beckhard. He also became a member of the OD Network, which still exists today. Although he was still ensuring L&D requirements were met, he was increasingly pulled into OD discussions on organisational effectiveness.

'I was very fortunate to be in the right place at the right time. Towards end of the 80s it was a fast-paced, competitive market; a critical business edge was to deliver on time and to the standards customers expected.'

✚ A key skill Jerry acquired in the US was 'process consultation', which has been useful throughout his career:

'To be really good at OD you need a blank sheet of paper and you need to be able to sit down with your client and understand what to do at that moment in time. Inevitably there will be a problem and to understand how to analyse what is going on here, what are the issues, what are the options, how do we consider solutions and work through the process together. That is what good OD is about – how we get to where we need to be from the current situation.'

4.4.3 Total quality management (TQM)

TQM was an important methodology during the period that Jerry was in the US and he became fully involved in the world of statistical process control and employee involvement. He believes that a lot of TQM is in fact OD, and this early experience helped lay a solid foundation of understanding about how to improve organisational effectiveness.

✚ *'At that time I was intellectually stimulated and practising OD in the workplace – re-engineering businesses, involving employees in redesign and process improvement and so on.'*

4.4.4 Managing the decline

In 1990 LEX pulled out of the States. There was oversupply in the market and Jerry spent the next year tidying up the business to get it ready to sell. At this stage he was no longer in HR but working direct for the Board as an OD consultant doing project management and facilitating process re-engineering, as well as a lot of redesign work with the business leads.

✚ For Jerry it was fascinating to be exposed to these hard commercial realities and he feels it was invaluable experience that has remained with him since. He looks back on his years in the US as *very formative*.

'To be a good OD practitioner you do need to understand what an enterprise is about and what drives the performance of an enterprise, whether commercial or public.'

4.5 Banking

4.5.1 Start-up

Jerry decided to come back to the UK and joined the Lloyds Banking Group in a start-up role. In the early 90s, Blackhorse Financial Services was in a very early phase with a sales force up and running but little else. He was brought in to help establish the organisation and get training and development infrastructure in place.

> *'It was an OD role reporting direct to the MD though not titled as such. The Board understood and the MD was enlightened and saw the need to establish a culture, processes and behaviours in the workplace to drive the performance needed. The experience and toolkit acquired in the States proved useful.'*

They set up an organisation of about 3,000 staff across the UK with a clear purpose of what it was about. There was a lot of work on culture, leadership and management capability, and US consultants were brought in to help. The majority of Jerry's time was focused on organisational effectiveness and performance and less on L&D. He remembers it as '*a very exciting time and a true OD role*'.

4.5.2 Change

The mid 90s, however, saw the pension scandals and raised a lot of compliance issues. Lloyds suffered badly; there was a clean sweep at board level and a new ethos of compliance. Jerry was asked to stay and help re-engineer the business. He was again involved in organisational design work for a year, from where he was offered the role of Head of HR.

4.5.3 HR (18 months)

Jerry feels that his appointment was somewhat ironic as he had decided not to be a generalist but he took up the role for 18 months and feels it was a useful addition to his CV. He didn't, however, gain much fulfilment from it and was keen to get back to people development.

4.6 Global banking

4.6.1 Talent management

His next role with the National Australia Bank was to head up the European executive resourcing and development area, working with the top 200 executives in Europe and reporting to the HR VP in Melbourne. In today's terms it was a

talent management role but it gave Jerry opportunities to develop global experience.

'It was good to be back in people development. There was lots of global work on leadership in Australia and the US. It was not an OD role looking back, very much focused on developing talent at the top end. It was, though, the first true global role.'

4.6.2 Culture

Some key insights from this period are around diversity and cultural difference.

At end of the 80s Jerry had done an MA at Lancaster University, with a dissertation on cultural difference. He was influenced by Hofstede's work, and then with the Australian bank he had the opportunity to do some work with Trompenaars. Some of the issues he was wrestling with were how to change a system and create a common identity and corporate culture.

The National Australian Bank was recognised in the financial services sector as an example of good practice. They worked with different business schools and were a forerunner of globally driven initiatives involving a number of different stakeholders – businesses, academic institutions and internal facilitators.

4.7 Telecoms (five years)

4.7.1 Merger and integration

When the bank moved to Glasgow, Jerry was approached by Cable and Wireless to be Head of L&D for Mercury. Telecoms was a new sector for him and was fast paced and exciting. He remembers his time there as *the best of his corporate career*.

'Mainly because at the time it was ablaze – tremendous growth and opportunities for achievement and success. It attracted very talented people, dynamic and able colleagues and a real spirit of collective effort I had not come across before.'

Within a few months they merged Mercury with three other organisations to make Cable and Wireless Communications. Jerry got involved in OD work on integration and the merger, and had a role supporting the board with organisational design and some of the people impact issues.

4.7.2 Training and development (18 months)

From there he was offered a new large operational role to head up training and development for the UK, during which time he remained firmly connected with broader organisational issues.

> *'There was a big OD agenda here. We were an organisation running at significant pace with lots of issues that were having a negative impact on our ability to deliver. Demand was far outstripping our ability to deliver what the customer required. We had big process issues, technology issues, as well as capability issues. There was an OD agenda which we needed to understand.'*

Jerry put forward an OD strategy for C&W UK that was accepted and he moved into a newly created role as Head of OD with L&D as an arm still reporting to him.

4.7.3 OD strategy

The new role was to implement the OD strategy, which was soon followed by a commercial decision to sell off what they had created. This was a tremendous opportunity to realise shareholder value by selling the business to NTL.

Jerry then became involved in a de-merger and led the business transformation process. At the same time C&W was consolidated and he was asked to take on a six-month project to integrate L&D worldwide, involving the C&W businesses in Hong Kong, Australia, America etc. By this time Jerry had become VP for L&D globally.

When the dotcom bubble burst, Jerry was once again involved in dismantling and outsourcing parts of the business.

4.8 Utilities (18 months)

4.8.1 Strategic alliances

After C&W Jerry wanted to do something different. The National Grid Group was growing and was culturally very different. They had just acquired new businesses in the US and had interests in South America and were looking to build a significant presence in utilities in the US while consolidating in the UK. Jerry became Director of OD and leadership development, reporting to the Group HR Director.

He describes it as interesting work, which provided new experiences such as redefining the role of the corporate centre which was something he hadn't done

before. Another new experience was looking at joint ventures and how to make them work, for which he led a project with some external specialists.

4.9 Independent OD & people development consultant (four years)

For some years Jerry had had an itch to do his own thing and set up his own business called 'Origin' (which still exists but is currently dormant). In a new phase of his career he provided consulting support in OD and learning.

He qualified as an executive coach at the Academy of Executive Coaching and began coaching alongside his other consultancy work. He feels these skills strengthened his OD approach.

> *'Having been trained to be a coach, I understand what skills are required: the ability to suspend judgement, to actively listen, to be able to push and pull the person you are working with in an appropriate way. That is the heart of good OD.'*

Most of his consultancy work was on large projects with BT, Canon, National Grid, TFL and Lloyds and a lot of his focus was on re-engineering L&D functions.

4.9.1 Public sector

TFL was his first taste of public sector work and he enjoyed the new experience. An initial consultancy project ended up as a nine-month interim assignment.

Jerry began to realise that he could add greatest value from working within a system and began to think about a return to organisational life.

4.10 Civil Service (four years ongoing)

At this time DWP were looking for someone to head up Organisational Capability, the scale of which was far bigger than anything Jerry had done before. The challenge and amount of work to increase capability was plain to see but he felt there was an openness and eagerness to have him in the role and he hasn't looked back. He has found it enjoyable and absorbing.

> *'The differences between the public and private sector are obvious – frustrations around hierarchy, accountability and bureaucracy – but there are opportunities to make a difference and help an organisation of this size (110k people) to build greater capability. I have been able to use all the experience and practice I have learned. Is it OD? Yes at one level but because of size it is an operational role.'*

Part of his focus has been to develop OD awareness across government and he began straight away to make connections with other departments. The cross-government HR Leaders Council that meets quarterly discussed OD and saw a real opportunity to build some internal capability rather than buy it in. This led to the creation of a group, which he has headed up for two years, to build awareness of what OD means, locate the necessary skills and develop capability in the HR function and within the HR business partner community. They have tried to connect experts and get them to work on cross-government issues and have set up a Community of Practice, which has been in place for over two years. There is now more awareness of where there are good OD practitioners and, in recent times, they have begun to undertake collaborative work across government. Most departments had started to do some OD design work prior to the election and a major programme was already in place to look at the future and at options for taking out costs. The focus has been on design rather than development and particularly de-layering.

4.11 General reflections

'OD suffers because of lack of clarity – it is so broad. Its raison d'etre is enabling an organisation to be as effective as it can be.'

Jerry sees this as a problem for the Civil Service, which doesn't fully know what to expect and has inherent resistance to anything vaguely nebulous. It is assumed that OD will be part of HR but Jerry doesn't think it necessarily should be. He does acknowledge, however, that the best HR directors are in fact OD directors and believes that is what HR should really be doing.

Finally he acknowledges that people come at OD from different perspectives:

'What do we understand OD to be? The humanistic tradition and the impact on people of change and how to support people through transition – that is my instinctive focus. Design is part of the agenda but not where I come from. Others come from process and systems background but what brings us together is having an appreciation of all the different levers that make that system work.'

5 Career Story: Christine Lloyd

Christine Lloyd has worked in or around the field of OD for 25 years. Her career spans several industries and sectors: energy; automotive; pharmaceutical; financial services; technology and not-for-profit. She is currently Global HR Director at UNICEF in New York.

5.1 Education

Christine identifies her educational path as important in her subsequent career development. She always had a passion for 'spatial' relationships and at 'A' level had difficulty deciding between art and science subjects. She finally chose maths, physics, geography and history, which she believes reflects an ongoing theme in her work of mixing 'hard' and 'soft' disciplines. At university her main subjects were geology and economics.

> *'Boundaries to me are intriguing places to be. You can view two worlds, dip into either and seek out the similarities and differences between them.'*

At university she specialised in hydrology and believes that understanding the flow, characteristics and energy of water has strongly influenced her approach to organisations and has served as a constant metaphor.

> *'The interconnectivity between water systems, their fluid boundaries and the dependency of each component on the whole cycle was the beginning of my viewing many aspects of life and organisations as a connected network. I was also struck by the sheer determination of water to find a natural course through any artificial barriers or blockages in its way. Water moulds itself to overcome obstacles, taking on the form and shape of its opposition in order to move forward.'*

5.2 Electricity industry (12 years in various roles)

5.2.1 Graduate trainee (one year)

Christine became a graduate trainee at Norweb at a time when electricity supply was still in the public sector, prior to privatisation. She was exposed to a variety of departments and roles during this time.

📖 As a graduate trainee Christine was given the choice of doing an IPM personnel qualification or the ACIS for chartered company secretaries. She chose the latter, which involved mainly finance and law. ✚ Very early on she was able to read a balance sheet and hold her own in financial discussions, which has been an important skill throughout her career.

5.2.2 Productivity services (two years)

With around 10,000 employees, Norweb's rigid organisational framework was characteristic of a traditional public sector bureaucracy. Her first full role consisted of defining and measuring activities for productivity improvements.

'At that time, my mantra became 'if it moves- time it or measure it!'

✚ During this period, she learned structured project management methods and the language of milestones, deliverables and deviations.

'Change management was defined then as "the actions needed to get us back to the plan".'

Mainframe computers were rapidly becoming part of organisational life and increasingly Christine got involved in transferring manual processes over to technological solutions. She became interested in the cognitive processes and how people's mindsets had to shift from doing work on paper to processing activities on a screen. This led her into the field of training.

5.2.3 From training to leadership and management development (nine years)

Norweb had a large training centre in Lancashire and Christine started designing and delivering training courses there. Aged 26, she was made Head of Leadership and Management Development and became one of the youngest senior managers in the electricity industry. In this role she worked extensively with the Electricity Council and on government working parties on new practices and policies.

👣 *'Key learning at this stage of my career was how even the most well thought-out and rigorous plans were influenced by a whole series of unpredictable variables such*

as behaviour, emotions, feelings and preferences. The often 'machine-like' approaches to implementing process and technology changes were often rendered unworkable when human behaviour was overlaid onto them.'

At that time Norweb was heading for privatisation and a key focus was to prepare managers to cope with a more commercial mode of operation. Christine describes this as an informative period in exploring the difference between public and private mindsets and shifting cultures.

In the late 80s Christine began an MA in management learning at Lancaster University and did a dissertation on 'The impact of technology on organisations of the future' – continuing her theme of the importance of both the 'hard' and 'soft' elements of organisations.

'I sensed that technology could hold the key to unlocking rigid hierarchies to become more open and enabling.'

It was as much the construct of the programme, however, that influenced Christine, drawing heavily on Tavistock approaches and based on principles of open learning and self-management.

'Placing a group of 24 people in a room and asking them to design and evaluate their own two-year masters programme was at the time an innovative and revolutionary idea. Possibly the academic equivalent of Big Brother!'

The learning came from deep conversations and differing perspectives as well as people's comfort or discomfort with ambiguity. There was key learning and discovery around concepts such as choices, flow, complexity and responsibility.

Her masters became a catalyst to make a career move and she subsequently moved to a role as a 'change manager' for the global information technology function at ICI.

5.3 Chemical industry (three years)

5.3.1 Process re-engineering and organisation design

Many of the aspects of the work at ICI were process- and technology-based. Christine's role involved a lot of design work – structures, processes and systems – but with a focus on integrating the people and behavioural aspects into technological innovations and improvements. One of her projects, for example, was shortening the value chain for the research innovation and another involved re-designing the global IT function.

👥 '*While focusing on design and architecture, I became even more aware of the overlay of social, human and behavioural considerations. It began to strike me that in 'designing' organisations you could potentially be creating some form of 'cage' that constrains innovation and creativity. The balance between frameworks and freedom suddenly became of paramount importance.*'

Christine began to question whether organisations could be 'designed' or whether they should simply evolve more naturally.

5.4 Finance (three years)

5.4.1 Change projects

Christine's next role was with N&P Building Society, which was looking for a change manager who understood people, processes and systems. The CEO had the notion of a very customer-focused organisation that was integrated and driven by knowledge management. The idea of having an intimate knowledge of your customers through data and relationships was very forward looking at that time. Working backwards from that goal, Christine's role was to help design an organisation that would deliver this customer-centric vision.

👥 '*A feature of my career has been an element of risk. I didn't join this organisation in a specific job – it was a question of "do six months' project work and then we will find you a job".*'

5.5 Industrial conglomerate (three years)

Her next role was with T&N (Turner and Newall), an old British company working mainly in the automotive components industry but with interests in mining and industrial products. This was the first introduction to major international work with factories all over Africa, North America and Europe. Christine's next decade was one of travel and diversity.

5.5.1 Culture and diversity

Starting as the Management and Leadership Development Director, she spent her last year at T and N as the Global HR Director.

➕ '*What that gave me was huge international experience. The challenges for leadership were both geographic and cultural but there were something like 50 separate companies under the holding company, all with their own brands and products and all run very discretely.*'

The challenge was to understand the culture of these different companies and find enough common elements which would link them but at the same time value diversity and difference.

5.6 Oil industry (three years)

5.6.1 International experience

Shell was looking for a Global Head of OD for the exploration business in The Hague. This was the first time in her career that Christine had lived abroad. Shell already had a long-established OD tradition and her role was to advise divisions around the world on OD issues, often reinventing the way they were organised, for example through outsourcing. She was also involved in re-designing the research and technology function.

5.7 Worldcom (two years)

Christine soon realised after joining Worldcom that this was not the place for her. She had been looking for an opportunity to move back to the UK and Worldcom, which was growing dramatically, was setting up the international division based in London. She was OD Director but the role never fulfilled its promises.

> *'It was never the right job for me. They saw it very much as a training role. You go into an organisation thinking you can do OD work but the system comes down on you and puts you into a box. After the exciting stuff we had done at Shell it was just too mechanistic and transactional.'*

At the same time Christine highlights the importance of working from integrity and values in genuine OD work, which was not the environment at Worldcom. Perhaps the one good thing to come from this experience for Christine was that, being in a technology organisation, it led directly to her being head hunted for her next role at Nokia. She is a great believer in 'synchronicity' and being in the right place at the right time.

5.8 Nokia (five years)

Nokia offered the integrity and values-based leadership that was lacking at Worldcom. Some of the challenges Christine got involved with were how to enable and encourage diversity while retaining the core Finnish culture that created much of Nokia's initial success.

'"Connecting people" was the strapline at Nokia and it was here that I personally redefined my view of organisations as "webs of relationships". OD was about enabling those connections to happen.'

5.8.1 Start-up

Helping to set up a venturing organisation within Nokia helped Christine understand that it was the relationships (or the 'space in between') rather than the tasks that were important. It was also a time for experimentation.

'The importance of holding on to complexity and ambiguity and not rushing into simplifying or clarifying situations too early was key learning.'

During this period Christine became even more interested in topics such as complexity theory and self-adapting systems. While it was often challenging to introduce these concepts to more structured engineers, it was a particularly rewarding phase of Christine's career to be able to try new things and put ideas into practice.

'This was the first time that experimentation and discovery had been legitimised and I didn't have to do "underground" work.'

5.8.2 Building an OD team

It was also an opportunity to build up an OD department. Nokia did not have an OD tradition and Christine's first title was VP HR for the venturing organisation. She started to build an OD team within the organisation and over the five years other people started to see added value in, for example, designing large-scale events and appreciative inquiry methods. After three years she was asked to set up a global OD department and during her last two years she was Global Head of OD for Nokia.

'It was a really good story of – you go in, it doesn't matter what your job title is, you introduce certain ideas and watch people experimenting with them and then eventually OD becomes part of the language and culture and you finally create a formal unit.'

5.9 Cancer Research UK (five years)

Her next role reflects a similar story in that although her title was Director of People and Organisation Development, the language of OD was not accepted or understood.

5.9.1 Not-for-profit

Christine was drawn back to the UK to an organisation which she felt had the potential to bring together a number of the challenges of her previous roles together. Key challenges were: how to foster innovation while adhering to the strict frameworks/governance of a not-for-profit organisation; how to integrate diverse cultures while still valuing difference; how to harness the passion of a life-saving cause (beating cancer) with the need to perform; and how to bring focus to an organisation that needed to operate as loose networks and collaborations.

5.9.2 Board-level position

Christine's early qualification as a company secretary has always enabled her to hold her own in the financial and control arena. As an executive board member at Cancer Research UK she was able to combine the more organic people and behavioural aspects with some of the harder organisational elements such as governance, process effectiveness and control mechanisms. She eventually expanded her 'people' role with responsibility for internal audit and risk management.

> *'This provides the opportunity to create and influence the necessary frameworks and boundaries within which freedom and creativity can be encouraged. I was trying to create an internal effectiveness function that was looking at ongoing feedback measures through the internal audit and risk management – how is the organisation doing?– and feeding it back through HR to start working on some cultural and process issues.'*

5.10 UNICEF (one year to present)

5.10.1 International civil service

After nearly five years at Cancer Research UK, just as she was starting to miss the international dimension, Christine was head hunted for UNICEF. It was an opportunity too good to miss. Going back to a challenging global agenda, having the opportunity to make a difference in the world and living in New York were all very appealing. It seemed like the ultimate challenge and Christine also saw links with her previous entrepreneurial experience as UNICEF had a challenging change agenda.

Christine is aware of the challenges of shifting her more traditional HR role as 'Global HR Director' into a strategic OD role but she is very aware of the challenges that lie ahead.

'You really have to constantly stop being dragged into the operational stuff. I have to fight my way out of it by creating the right design and finding the right people that allow me to spend more time in the strategic arena.'

Just over one year into the role, Christine describes it as working with a multi-dimensional system with constantly shifting priorities as some of the world's most challenging humanitarian crises unfold. She has 140 nationalities and cultures to work with as well as all the internal challenges of change.

She also continues to pursue her entrepreneurial and innovation focus by mentoring and coaching a group of young social entrepreneurs in New York.

5.11 General reflections

Christine feels she has never 'planned' her career. She has often joined organisations not fully knowing what her role would be but trusting she would find the appropriate place to be influential from. She calls it 'opportunistic OD'.

'OD is a pervasive and distributed capability within an organisation – not a department…I have found that approaching activities in a holistic, connected and open style soon becomes addictive. Success breeds success.'

A key 'attractor' has been the person she would report to and this has often been a deciding criterion for moving between organisations. The integrity and values of the CEO is an important factor as OD work is primarily about role modelling the behaviours and values that enable people to be at their best.

After a long career in OD she feels that her work and life are in harmony.

'Fundamental concepts such as options, choices, holding paradoxes and boundaries are the way I choose to live in my personal and business worlds. It has been an adventurous journey with many paths still to explore.'

6 Career Story: David Stephenson

David Stephenson was Group Head of OD at Royal Mail at the time of this interview. He looked back over his richly varied career to identify how he built up the skills for OD, where he felt the key turning points were, and the lessons and insights learned along the way.

6.1 Learning the ropes in the Royal Navy (six years)

David spent his early career in the Royal Navy as a seaman officer holding positions as navigator and then first lieutenant and subsequently specialising in diving and mine clearance.

✚ The variety of challenges and the early responsibility of line managing teams of people, often a lot older than him, shaped his views of leadership and taught him many important skills for the future at the early age of 22.

6.1.1 General people management

Looking after people who have been at sea for long periods presents additional challenges for a manager, particularly when they are under pressure and operational stress. He found himself at a young age being asked about personal finance and relationship problems and sometimes adopting the role of social worker.

> *'You pick up all the basic people management skills that are needed for OD. On reflection looking back at it you start to appreciate the importance of communication and leadership.'*

6.1.2 Management of resources and tasks

As well as the people aspects, there was a lot to learn about resources and tasks, and David highlights the importance of structure and everyone knowing their own role, while still allowing surprising latitude for personal judgement.

'When reading Elliott Jaques' material in later years all about organisational effectiveness being dependent on the correct hierarchies, roles and accountabilities, I reflect back on how key that was to an effective armed service. Mind you at the time I think I moaned about the hierarchy!'

6.1.3 Different styles of leadership

While leadership is a key theme in the forces, David saw many different styles of leadership in his early career, from influencing to more straightforward command and control. He feels that when you are away at sea for so long in a 'tin can' with hundreds of other people, it doesn't work simply to 'tell' and requires much less of the 'command and control' than people would assume.

'You get lots of training but leadership is very real and there is much more focus and attention on how to do it than elsewhere that I have seen.'

6.2 Waste management (four years)

After the navy, David didn't know what to do initially. He was accepted for the police as a fast-track inspector and nearly joined MI6, but realised he had probably had his fill of the establishment by then and decided to get into commerce. Instead he joined a new fast-growing waste management company, which he looks back on as terrific fun.

'My boss was a real rough diamond "Dell boy" and I became his right-hand man, troubleshooting failed sites and managing key projects.'

6.2.1 Operational experience

David's first task was running a waste management site in Hillingdon. He soon turned the site round and into profit (his first P&L experience) and was given responsibility for other sites, and within a couple of months became Area Manager responsible for approx £5m profit. The organisation was trying to shed the industry stereotypical 'cowboy' image and position itself as the UK's market leader.

6.2.2 Quality and standards

David was soon given the responsibility to apply for BS5750 and as it was the first waste company to go through the process there was no blueprint for success. He added the new role of Quality Manager to his other jobs and wrote the procedures for the company. In the absence of any rules, he began to codify everything the company did, setting up internal audits and training. Everyone was delighted when they got their accreditation and David qualified as a BSI inspector, able to audit external suppliers.

➕ *'To learn about quality and standards you learn to spot what is wrong, to look at the patterns.'*

♟ *'On reflection by writing all these rules I could see I'd created a monster, but the Board loved it and I couldn't get them to see the risk in it. If we'd failed the audit we probably would have learnt more as a business and this was my first inkling of organisational learning.'*

6.2.3 Commercial experience

David began to accumulate more hats and also became the Sales Manager, which meant learning about the commercial side of things. There was a team of sales people who were all generating new business but David realised that no one was looking at the retention of customers. He worked out that changing the mix of customers led to increased profits.

📖 During this period David did a part-time MBA and gained particular insight from Professor Ralph Stacey on 'complexity' and 'organisational dynamics'.

☛ *'The veil was lifted from my eyes about how things really work behind, underneath and amongst the formal organisation. I became intrigued by complexity theory and how it applied to organisations going through change.'*

He also attended a Tavistock day – *'with no brief we sat around a circle and wondered what was going on. I thought there was going to be a fight at one stage'*! ➕ This was a fascinating insight into group dynamics, something he began to realise can be a key issue in understanding organisations.

6.2.4 Partnering

Further key learning for David during this period was through his work with the trade unions, predominantly the very militant TGWU. He developed excellent relationships with the unions and overturned fixed stances such as LIFO and pay for skills, through the strength of the partnership.

6.2.5 Training

As David was looking for ways to complete his MBA and remain at the firm while doing an easier role, he suggested he become UK Training Manager, which was a new role. He was told that if he could pay for himself (through training grants) he could have the job. He started by setting up a performance appraisal system and did a lot of work with the unions to break down 'them and us' barriers, work on health and safety and whatever he thought was needed.

'When I look back on it this was real OD. I didn't see any boundaries.'

At the same time he started to design and deliver training on anything and everything, from how to move a smallpox-infected graveyard (never done before!) to leadership development, finance courses and establishing the graduate and talent management process. He also took the opportunity to go on every course he could find.

As the whole industry was trying to professionalise, David created work standards for landfill operations. He got together 10 operators at Europe's largest landfill site, trained and developed them, and showed them how to write and codify everything that should be done, from checking in a lorry and making sure it is the right weight to supervising a tipping operation.

'It was a great lesson in empowerment as the lads commandeered a portacabin, a PC, set up the office and organised it all themselves.'

He later asked one of that team to do a presentation to the Board of the glass company David had then just joined on what they had achieved in multi-skilling the workforce. The Board were so impressed by the presentation from the landfill operator that three of them offered him a job afterwards.

'Some key learning is that if you give people the right opportunity, motivation and support they can go way beyond anyone's expectation.'

Their competence system became the industry standard for the whole of the UK and David was invited onto the Waste Management Industry Training Board.

6.3 Glass company (three years)

In his next role David wanted to make more of his MBA and joined a French glass company (St Gobain) as Training and Development Manager. The UK subsidiary were loss making and the previous year they had cut the headcount by 30 per cent, but the new CEO felt they needed to take out a further 30 per cent to break even again.

6.3.1 Process improvement

A consultant from the Tom Peters group was brought in and did an activity value analysis in one part of the company. David and a couple of others were then charged with doing it in the rest of the company. Everyone in the business had to write down their core value-adding activities, their support activities and what were called 'disturbance' activities.

'It was almost a LEAN process improvement, which generated a lot of ideas that were taken up by the executive and turned the business round into profit. It was a big learning about process improvement and tapping into employees' ideas.'

6.3.2 HR

As there was no HR director, David was again reporting to an MD. He put in an employee share scheme and started to take an interest in the 'comp and bens' side – what motivates and what doesn't. They also put in HAY job evaluation. He carried out a time and motion study, spending time out with the sales people, and showed that only seven per cent of their time was actually selling. Based on the findings he halved the sales force from 120 to 60 and managed the outplacement. He then set up call centres and restructured the sales role.

6.4 Volvo Truck and Bus (one year UK)

6.4.1 Learning and development and OD

Volvo was David's third role in learning and development, reporting to the Financial Director this time.

His first year was spent in the UK and led to another breakthrough and level of awareness. There was a team of about 15 training managers, each with their own area such as IT, sales, management and mechanics.

'It was a large training centre growing fast but it felt like the M25 where you add a new lane and it fills with traffic. It wasn't popular but I challenged why we were doing more and more training without knowing if it was adding value.'

At this time David went on a course about shifting from training needs analysis to performance needs analysis. This involved identifying performance issues and doing root cause analysis. Rather than simply providing knowledge and skills training, they were encouraged to look at the environmental and motivational issues. David then trained his team and had the confidence to tell the Board that training was the last (and most costly) thing they should do without

first understanding the performance issues and without also tackling the other environmental and motivational issues.

This led to several changes: trainers became expert in performance needs analysis, and they were re-named OD consultants and moved out into the regions as business partners (before the term became fashionable).

> *'They became essentially internal consultants – some made the transition and others didn't. It was about designing solutions to business problems.'*

While Volvo HQ in Sweden was initially upset by some of changes, they subsequently adopted the model across all Europe.

> *'It felt like an exciting time to do what you thought was right and we challenged things.'*

📖 During this time David was reading widely about self-development and learner-centred approaches.

People had traditionally stood at the front and trained people, for example on an engine. By end of his tenure a four-day course became two days and trainers were able to run two programmes at once. They identified competencies that participants needed and measured and assessed them at the end of every course. Trainees were basically given computers and kit, with a goal of what they had to learn/achieve by the end of the two days. The trainer was available if needed, there was a manual and they were left to self-organise.

> *'It was a bit of a revolution but it felt right.'*

6.4.2   Culture and personal change

📖 Another key learning point for David came during a series of four-day programmes on culture change for everyone in head office.

> 🔖 *'People cried a lot; it was very deep and strengthened my view at the time that organisational **change starts from a deep individual level**. It totally lifted the lid off the business, with half the Board saying it changed their lives (positively) and half still in resistance. It opened up possibilities of things being different.'*

David ended up co-delivering this programme. However, he left for his next role before the programme was embedded. The MD then changed and an HR Director was recruited, and behaviours reverted right back.

> 👥 *'An interesting observation is that if you start an ambitious process of real culture change at a behavioural level and don't see it through, it can leave people in a very difficult place as expectations are raised but not met.'*

David continued his interest in self-development. He went on to help Jack Black (motivational speaker) who was just starting then, getting him onto video. He also delivered personal change programmes to audiences of up to 500, as part of some freelance work.

He also did a weekend with Tony Robbins, who had also just come over to the UK in the 90s ('unleash the power within').

'I was on the ceiling for three months when I came back.'

6.5 China: Volvo Truck Corporation (two years)

In 1997 David became HR Director in China, leading all aspects of people and organisational change. The move gave him a lot of exposure to differing cultural norms and international HR issues. He read 'every book he could find', including Hofstede, and went on to design a China culture-shock programme for the 50 expatriate families planning to follow him to China.

This was a broader HR role for David: there was a good deal of relationship building and stakeholder management, negotiating with the government, and dinners with the city mayor and minister of the province.

'Big learning for me was appreciating the strength of relationships ahead of process or task – you have to in China. That was a big insight for me.'

The role provided a real mix and variety:

'Anything went and I could do what I wanted. There was a lot of leeway to experiment; no one telling me what to do. This was much more macro level and a lot of design stuff.'

He negotiated income tax levels with the government; everything was negotiable at the time in China. He also had to merge five factories into one and as they only needed four thousand people, he had to figure out how to downsize from the 80,000 they had! He downsized his Chinese HR department to 60 staff.

David came back home as his son was ill and was offered a general management role or a post overseas elsewhere, but he decided to try consultancy and remain in the UK.

6.6 Arthur Anderson (three years)

6.6.1 Consultancy

David found Anderson's an exciting environment, where he could still take a blank-sheet approach and use his experience as well as take the opportunity to acquire more consulting tools.

Peter Senge and organisational learning were the big thing.

> *'Dr Jim Rieley worked with Senge in the early 90s and was brilliant at using systems diagrams to analyse organisational problems. He challenged and coached the executive team at Arthur Andersons and taught some of us consultants how to use systems diagrams.'*

David later co-delivered the five-day programme with him.

> *'Doing the five-day organisational learning programme for all consultants was great fun and reinforced the mix of personal mastery and systems thinking that is such a critical aspect of OD.'*

Consulting provided exposure to a lot of different business contexts such as start-ups; a privatisation; a few mergers; PFI in local government; technology implementations and a global brand launch.

> *'Honing your consulting skills is a core part of an OD person. You need to be capable across the whole consulting cycle.'*

When Enron happened the house of cards fell down. He also experienced the Asian crisis and the dotcom bubble.

> 👣 *'Shift happens when the rules of the game change. All that complexity theory stuff just keeps on appearing in practice!'*

6.7 FSA (nine months)

David had been advising the FSA MD on their merger and she asked him to join them after Enron. McKinsey had set the FSA strategy and David led the change management advice to make the strategy work when FIMBRA, IMRO and the other different organisations were thrown together.

6.8 Bupa (one year)

After his interim assignment at the FSA, David decided to get back into operational management again.

'As a general manager you can do all the people stuff – it doesn't have to be through HR.'

6.9 Royal Mail (seven years)

After further interim work at BT, doing communications for the broadband launch and then change transformation in BT Wholesale, David joined Royal Mail. He carried out various leadership roles in HR, including Change Director for the whole Group and then inherited a large OD team.

'I see OD as a smorgasbord of different disciplines. In my mind's eye I have the Galbraith star, which is a simple way to show how the parts (strategy, structure, process, people, reward) must work effectively together, but it is so much more than that. OD is about increasing the effectiveness AND the health of the organisation. So the "How" becomes as important as the "What".'

6.9.1 Team working

David inherited an OD team of over 15 (originally over 40) with a traditional focus on job and organisation design. He was told he had to cut it down within six months and 'make it strategic'. The subsequent learning as a team was that they needed at least eight people to do a comprehensive OD job with a mix of capability, including operational excellence, strategy, design, psychology, learning, and systems thinking. David provided a bit of each, but needed to recruit and strengthen the OD capability of the team. A world-class team evolved, but it was a constant battle to balance the delivery of operational change projects, which others demanded and expected, with the other OD aspects such as:

'Getting underneath the patterns, surfacing root causes, challenging the system, joining it all up. There didn't seem to be many people in the business stepping back and seeing the whole system. That's what we tried to do. My team also said my job was "asker of awkward questions".'

When the team became smaller than six, there was less of a community and it became difficult to cover all the work.

'It can be lonely on your own and there is something to be said to have a team to support, recharge, develop, and encourage each other to challenge the system.'

'Also, as OD resource is reduced then those remaining have no choice but to adopt more of a coaching style (than normal) and leverage change through others.'

In terms of scope they defined four levels of OD intervention: personal, interpersonal, team and organisational.

'Our job was to go a level up and a level below the problem that was presented. So level up was "so what?", "why are we doing this?" and links to strategy. Level down – "why does this keep happening, what's really going on at a deeper level?"'

📖 During this period David did the NTL OD certificate programme which was good for drawing threads together and gave access to a lot of the US gurus. David also went to America and experienced the T-group where he gained more self awareness.

He also met Professor Edgar Schein and gained insights from him reflecting about his own personal journey.

♟ Among the comments from Schein that he found very revealing was:

'If you find yourself more emotionally attached to the outcomes than your client, then you'll get into trouble. Don't try to impose your own value set on the client. Learn to give up or at least let go and you'll see much more. You sometimes have to accept the ugliness of the system.'

6.10 General reflections

A key lesson from David is the need for sponsorship.

'If the HR Director doesn't get it, where do you go – maybe the CEO or Strategy Director – but if there is nobody at that level, then it becomes tough, you might say impossible. You can do meaningful work but genuine transformation and OD work requires a degree of ambition from the leadership for the people and the business.'

Another insight is how important it is to have networks with other OD practitioners, and he feels he has often learned more from them than through other formal learning. He also believes there is something about shared values.

'The people I recognise as OD people hold similar values: respect for the individual; respecting diversity (of views, opinions, alternatives); a belief that everyone has something to offer. If you treat people well and give them the opportunities, support and expectations, they will go beyond what you expect.'

7 Common Threads

Looking across the careers of very senior OD practitioners, we can see that while they each approach OD from different routes, there are clearly common patterns and threads. Some of these are illustrated in Figure 7.1.

Figure 7.1: Common threads
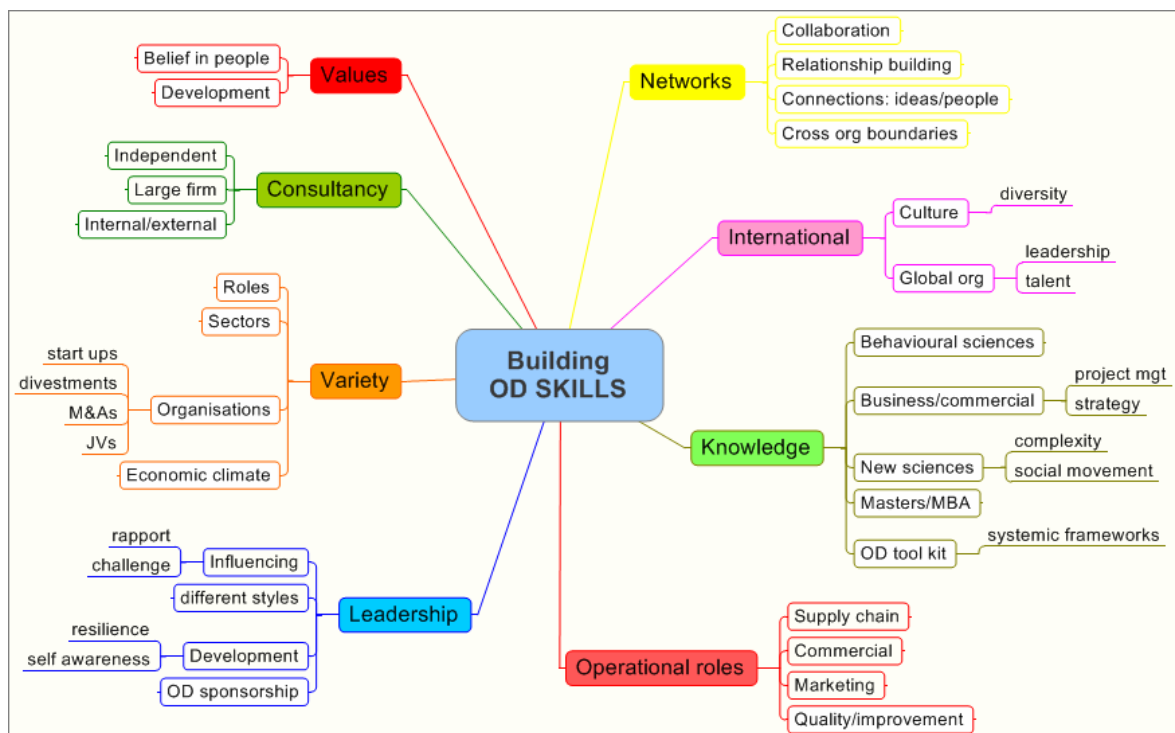
Source:

7.1 Variety

The three people featured in our career stories have all experienced a wide variety of roles, sectors, organisations and economic environments. They have tended to

either move organisation regularly or change role frequently within their organisation.

7.1.1 Roles

What is immediately striking is the variety of roles they have each held. David, in particular, illustrates the principle of 'start anywhere, go anywhere' as he rapidly acquired new responsibilities, at one stage simultaneously holding titles of Area Manager, Quality Manager, BSI Inspector, Sales Manager and UK Training Manager, as well as working closely with the trade unions and sitting on the Waste Management Industry Training Board.

It is a principle, however, that they all demonstrate in continuously reinventing their roles, broadening them as they see opportunities to increase the effectiveness of their organisations. Jerry, for example, from a training and development role saw that there were process, technology and capability issues preventing Cable and Wireless from meeting customer needs. He then put forward an OD strategy that meant he moved into a newly created role of Head of OD. Christine, meanwhile, was able to embrace risk and governance within her role at Cancer Research UK.

7.1.2 Organisations

All three career stories involve experience of different types of organisations across different sectors. Each of them has worked in a start-up for example, where there are fast-paced opportunities to experiment and try something counter-cultural. For Christine, helping to set up Nokia's venturing organisation saw her drawing on complexity and realising the primacy of relationships over tasks. For Jerry, the start-up of Blackhorse Financial Services provided a blank canvas for establishing a culture that would deliver the customer-centred vision. Similarly, David was able to bring new professional standards to the waste management industry at a time of rapid growth in that field and later worked with the FSA in its early days.

At the other end of the spectrum they have also experienced traditional large bureaucracies and blue chip companies.

7.1.3 Growth and decline

Having had long careers, all three of our career stories feature experience of rapid economic growth as well as rapid decline. The growth periods are characterised by design work to ensure the organisation grows in an appropriate way to respond to customer needs. They have all had merger experience. Jerry was involved in OD work on integration and organisational design work following

Mercury's merger with three other organisations to form Cable and Wireless, as well as the acquisitions of the National Grid Group. David had to merge five factories into one for Volvo in China.

There are equally periods where they have been involved in re-design as part of the closure or sale of a business. They have all experienced sudden downturns: Enron, the Asian crisis, the dotcom bubble, WorldCom. Jerry believes that exposure to these hard commercial realities is particularly formative and stands them in good stead in the current environment. David describes it as a 'shift when the rules of the game change' and sees it as complexity in practice.

7.1.4 Sectors

All three have worked across sectors. For example, Christine was involved in helping managers to develop a commercial mindset prior to privatisation in the utilities industry. She went on to large private sector organisations, then to the voluntary sector at Cancer Research UK and now to the international civil service at UNICEF.

7.2 Leadership and early responsibility

We have already seen that each of our case story examples created opportunities and new roles for themselves as they identified what needed to happen to build organisational effectiveness. This means that they took on responsibility early in their careers.

Christine, for example, became Head of Leadership and Management Development at the age of 26 and was the youngest ever senior manager at Norweb. David's experience in the navy meant that he was looking after a division of people much older than him at the age of 22.

Each of them has had a passion for leadership and gravitated towards developmental roles, although only Jerry would call his 'core' profession L&D.

7.3 Knowledge and theory

Another striking characteristic of our three featured individuals is their ability to integrate theory and practice in a personal journey of continuous learning.

Each of them point to the influence of their early education: Jerry's degree in behavioural science at Aston in the 70s, Christine's mix of 'hard' and 'soft' disciplines at 'A' level and a degree in geology and economics, David's officer training in the Royal Navy. These educational experiences provided very different groundings in OD: Jerry's more traditional OD blend of psychology/sociology,

Christine's specialism in hydrology and ongoing fascination with flow and energy, and David's experience of leading people under operational stress.

7.3.1 Masters

They have each gone on to do masters degrees; Christine and Jerry did the MA in Management Learning at Lancaster University and David an MBA at the University of Hertfordshire. This further formal learning encouraged a deepening of knowledge as well as new insights.

Christine's dissertation was on the impact of technology on organisations of the future and she believed that technology could begin to liberate rigid hierarchies. Her real insight from the masters, however, was the innovative approach to self-managed learning. Jerry's dissertation was on cultural difference, which was important to him during his time at the Australian bank. David was greatly influenced by studying complexity with Ralph Stacey during his MBA.

These higher degrees prompted a change of career for both Christine and David.

7.3.2 Other qualifications and skills

One of the areas of study that has proved valuable to Christine was her qualification on the Norweb graduate scheme as a chartered company secretary (ACIS), which ensured she was well versed in finance and law from an early stage in her career and has enabled her to hold her own in board-level positions.

David has done many courses and programmes throughout his career but has recently done the NTL OD certificate programme, which brought a lot of the different threads together and gave him the opportunity to hear many of the American gurus and participate in T-groups in the US.

Jerry qualified as an executive coach at the Academy of Executive Coaching and began coaching alongside his other consultancy work.

7.3.3 Influences: people and theories

Having been involved in leadership development all our case examples have had exposure to some of the leading international thinkers and academics. Jerry learned from Beckhard and Argyris in the States and later Hofstede and Trompenaars, while David points to Edgar Schein, Jim Rieley, Tony Robbins, Jack Black and Ralph Stacey as key influencers.

Theories and tools that have been helpful include systems thinking, complexity, process consultation, business process re-engineering, change models, culture models and many others.

7.3.4 Networks, relationships and senior-level support

Networks and personal relationships have been important throughout the three OD career stories we have told. David believes networks are a rich source of learning with people who share similar values and acknowledges that OD can be a lonely career at times.

They each point to relationships as key to effecting change. Their importance is underlined at various points in their stories, from dealings with trade unions, setting up joint ventures and working across global cultures to setting up an OD team. Underpinning this is a strong humanistic value that if people are given the right support and encouragement, they can achieve extraordinary things.

A senior level sponsor, however, is seen as vital by our OD leaders. Christine has tended to only take roles where she has been personally invited by a CEO who is committed to supporting her. She describes how the system 'closes you down' without sufficient senior-level support. David also agrees that while you can do some meaningful work, transformation only happens with top-level support.

7.4 International experience

All of our case examples have worked internationally and believe this has been important experience in appreciating the impact of culture and in valuing diversity.

David's experiences of living and setting up a joint venture in mainland China led him to put together a development programme for other employees and families moving out there. Jerry has extensive experience in global talent management and developing global leaders. After a long international career, Christine now has 140 nationalities and cultures to deal with at UNICEF.

7.5 Consultancy

With their wealth of experience it is unsurprising that David and Jerry have both had spells as consultants; Jerry set up his own consulting company and David joined Arthur Anderson Consulting. This gave them exposure to a variety of organisational contexts and opportunities to use their extensive experience and, in David's case, acquire a new set of consulting tools from the Anderson repertoire. They both enjoyed taking a 'blank sheet' approach and David believes that honing consultancy skills is a core part of OD. Consultancy also opens up new avenues and gave Jerry his first taste of the public sector, in which he has remained ever since.

7.6 Links to HR

At some point in their career each of our OD leaders has headed up HR. While only Jerry began his career in a personnel role the others have occasionally found themselves in an HR functional role. David first became HR Director for Volvo in China and had to learn how to pay people, negotiate tax levels and redundancy compensation as well as design the HR department and a change programme. Christine is currently Global HR Director but finds she struggles to avoid being dragged into 'operational stuff'. She recognises, however, that OD language and titles can sometimes be an issue and has therefore often worked under the HR banner. Jerry believes that in any case the best HR directors tend to be doing OD director roles.

7.7 Summary

Looking back over the career stories, our OD leaders bring to their organisations a wide variety of expertise including: commercial awareness; audit skills, process improvement and re-engineering skills; operational experience; cultural understanding and diversity experience; organisational design; talent and leadership development; and strong relationship building/partnering ability. They have moved on fairly regularly to meet new challenges and acquire new learning and experience, often focusing on specific project work and at other times holding a substantial functional role. They have significant international experience and have built substantial networks.

This combination of skills, knowledge and experience enables them to understand what makes an enterprise function and to take a whole systems view of how to increase an organisation's effectiveness. But it is their fundamental belief in developing people and thereby organisations that marks them out as real OD leaders.

Learning to swim, learning to fly? A career in organisational development

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Despite growing interest in Organisational Development (OD) in the UK, it is difficult to find well-trodden career paths within the field. This can be frustrating for those seeking to develop a career in OD and perplexing for organisational leaders who are wondering how they might develop OD capability in their organisations. This report offers insights into what it really means to be an OD professional and tackles practitioners on that difficult question: are OD practitioners born or made? It highlights how many paths are open to those seeking to develop a career in OD and shines a spotlight on the career journeys of three people with top OD jobs. Finally it offers practical advice gleaned from those who have done the job on how to develop a career in OD.