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March 2012

Online at <https://mpra.ub.uni-muenchen.de/50252/>

MPRA Paper No. 50252, posted 28 Jan 2014 13:20 UTC

Adapting through personal development

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Abstract

Purpose – The paper aims to reveal and discuss the recent growing interest for personal development that seems to outline an emerging study field, and especially a flourishing industry of training business, but with many different approaches more or less related to individual needs and perceptions.

Methodology/approach – After synthesizing of SciVerse Hub statistics on publications and research areas referring to personal development, we review few conceptual approaches and we present the main results of a study of individual perceptions on this.

Findings – A growing number of subject areas addresses related issues of personal development, especially social sciences, business and management. The results of study showing that respondent's perceptions on personal development reflect rather a limited understanding of the concept.

Research limitations/implications – The study has a limited research area (a number of 163 Romanian students), making difficult generalization of results.

Practical implications – Organizations are groups of individuals performing economic activities, so that any organizational capability depends on individual capabilities and willingness of self-change that is personal development's essence.

Originality/value – The paper provides an evidence-based overview about interests for personal development and discusses some implications and results of a study on individual perceptions within a group of Romanian master students in Human Resource Management.

Key words: personal development, self-management, self-change.

Personal development - a common increasingly used term, but how many meanings?

In the new millennium, all major aspects of human life appear to be heavily marked by globalization, continuous change and unprecedented uncertainty. Day after day, everything around us seems less predictably and controllable, our jobs are more unsecure, individual requirements and responsibilities are more demanding under the pressure of time and global competitiveness, implying a greater effort for an appropriate change of self in order to keep the pace with all these. Consequently any of us can become more concerned about oneself, wondering how could find its own place, identity and sense of life within such a rapid changing world with globally determined coordinates. And because concerns of this kind are usually considered as being issues of personal development (PD), it's understandable why one says that in the 21st century this has turned from a luxury in a necessity (Aubrey, 2010).

So, is no wonder that term of PD is used now more than never, or that the interest for the topic was increasingly expanded during last years, both as number of writings and of study fields addressing PD related issues. It's a fact evidenced by the results that we have obtained through a search of this term performed with SciVerse Hub - a platform enabling

advanced searches across SciVerse ScienceDirect and SciVerse Scopus content - two leading scientific databases, and web content (<http://www.hub.sciverse.com/>). Thus according SciVerse Hub statistics, the total number of searching results were greater each year since the beginning of new millennium - an increase of more than 80 times, from almost 70,000 in 2000 to almost 6 million in 2011. Only in less than three months of the current year (at March 15, 2012) the number of results was almost double than in all final year of the past century (1999). In table 1 we synthesize the SciVerse Hub statistics on search results grouped by main type of documents and subject area/field.

Table 1. SciVerse Hub Statistics on results of searching for “personal development”

Specifications	1999-2012	2012 (15.03)	Subject Area (in descending order of results)
Total number of results	11,225,554	96,675	Social Sciences; Business, Management and Accounting; Economics, Econometrics and Finance; Medicine and Dentistry; Psychology; Biochemistry, Genetics and Molecular Biology; Immunology and Microbiology; Agricultural and Biological Sciences; Computer Science; Environmental Science; Neuro-science; Pharmacology, Toxicology and Pharmaceutical Science.
Books	99,095	653	
Conferences	28,211	56	
Full text articles	897,382	15,501	
Theses & Dissertations	265,311	529	

These statistics show a growing number of subject areas addressing related issues of PD explicitly or implicitly, with a particular interest in social sciences, business and management, suggesting that PD appears to outline itself as a multidisciplinary emerging study field. But, as say Steve Pavlina, it is a very broad and fragmented field, because: (1) any area of life "can reasonably slide under the umbrella of self-improvement", and (2) each of these areas "has its own purported experts" who have ideas, rules and advice somewhat different, being often in disagreement (Pavlina, 2008, p. xvii). This may explain why, despite that PD became a common widespread used term, as evidenced from presented statistics, "the concept is itself endowed with numerous implicit meanings" (Donatti and Watts, 2005, p. 475). Thus the conceptual approaches of PD still suggest rather a diversity of views than a consensus that could and should result in a more clear understanding of the term, as a prerequisite of ensuring a sound foundation for study in the field.

Obviously, the multitude of various topics that can have explicit or implicit connections with PD may justify different approaches of issues, depending on purpose and context.

For example, within the general context of human growth and development, a main purpose is to study the factors which are more important in determining of who we are and what we become (Beckett and Taylor, 2010), and also their interactions which lead to development through a progressive series of changes (Salkind, 2004). These approaches reveal two major determinants - biological and environmental factors, underlying debates on prevalence of our biological inheritance or of environment within we grow up, suggestively termed by Beckett and Taylor as "nature" and "nurture" (Beckett and Taylor, 2010).

In a more specific context, even if often PD is used now interchangeable with 'personal growth', some previous works suggested a distinction between the two concepts (Irving and Williams, 1999; Johns, 2002). Thus, according to Irving and Williams, PD "is a process concerned with specific aspects of the individual: the development of 'what', and the ways this can be planned, achieved and evaluated", while personal growth "is a more generic process having to do with the totality of the individual" (Irving and Williams, 1999, p. 517).

Another conceptual distinction is emphasized within the context of training, in terms of how PD is related to (and differs from) professional development: each of the two inextricably contains the other, while may be distinguished as semantic and training purpose (Waters, 1999; Johns, 2002).

The many attempts of defining PD are convergent in essence, in the sense that they refer to a complex process implying "change of self, by self, for self" (Waters, 1999, p. 173). In other words, it involves a self-initiated process started from a desire for changing and improving – as perceived in a personal view – supported by individual effort of self-actualization, and having as ultimate end the improvement of own life. Quality of life may be improved through PD, as a result of learning and applying the appropriate ways for self-management of various aspects defining each of us – generally as human being, and individually as person.

According to Hazel Johns there is a "traditional trinity revered in adult learning" for PD: knowledge, skills and awareness - of self and others (Johns, 2002, p. 4). These can refer to each of the aspects related to major areas of personal growth (World Organization of the Scout Movement, <http://www.scout.org>): the body – physical development, the intelligence – intellectual development, the emotions – emotional development, the social nature – social development, the soul – spiritual development, the identity – character development, as person.

To conclude, there are various aspects that define us as human beings and as persons that shape our identity and life, and are all important for PD. The problem is that each of us can have a different view about what is more important for its own life – a different perception on PD. This make at least questionable the promise of some authors and/or training providers in the field – increasing as number during the last years – which claim they have discovered an "universal key of success" that can be easily used by every person, of course, with condition to buy their books and/or enroll in their training programs.

Against this background, considering the similar national tendency related to increasingly number of writings and training providers in the field, we considered opportune to undertake an exploring study of individual perceptions about PD. The methodology and the main results of the study are briefly presented in the follows.

Methodology of study and demography of respondents

The study was conducted among the students enrolled in the two years master program of Human Resource Management offered by Faculty of Sciences, University of Petrosani, Romania. It was based on a questionnaire with open questions, having at origin an online questionnaire available at www.artterapia.ro*. We adapted the questionnaire by reformulating some of the questions, and asking for few basic demography data – gender, year of study, and employment status.

Total number of master students enrolled during the period considered was 202, out of which have responded 163 – response rate of 80.7 percent, N = 163. The demographic structure of respondents as resulted by grouping them based on each of the three above mentioned elements was as follows:

- 30.7 percent male, and 69,3 percent female;
- 49.7 percent in the first year of study, and 50.3 percent in the second year of study;
- 38 percent employed, and 62 percent without jobs – only 21.8 percent of them being officially registered as unemployed.

The six open questions considered for the study with aim to explore the respondents perceptions on PD were:

Q1: Do you know what is referring to the term of personal development?

Q2: What personal development really mean for you?

Q3: How long – in hours – could you allocate for this purpose during a month?

Q4: What topics would meet your needs?

Q5: What are your expected results after attending a personal development program?

Q6: What do you think about development by the means of arts – music, dance, painting, theater, film, photos, etc.?

Content analysis of responses was done separately on each of these questions, aiming to identify prevalent common elements allowing for their grouping in some relevant categories for statistical data processing and interpretation. The main results are presented and discussed in the next section.

Statistical results, discussions and concluding remarks

For the first two questions – that have tried to establish whether PD is a known, familiar, or unknown term, and what are its real meanings for each of respondents, after applying methodological procedure described before were identified seven main categories of responses. Thus, the many of respondents (26.4 percent) thinks that PD refers in essence to reaching the goals – own or/and organizational.

The next two categories (with weights equal, of 19 percent) are those who consider that PD refer to a process of improvement of skills/competencies and relationships, respective to a training process. But almost as many are those with answers suggesting that either they don't know to what PD is refer to, or even not heard of this term (18.4 percent).

In addition, another category of respondents (representing 12.5 percent) refer to some issues that show rather a confusion/overlap with professional development. We noted that only 2.5 percent of respondents believe that personal development implies spiritual growth, and even less respondents (1.8 percent) consider that this term refer to different practical ways to succeed.

As concerning the answers to the second question, the prevalent category was formed by the respondents who said that for them-selves PD means mainly development of personal skills/competencies and relationships (29.4 percent). Then have followed two categories of respondents, for which PD means primarily a growing of own potential (24.5 percent), respective acquiring of new knowledge (19 percent). The next category of respondents (14.7 percent) answer in rather vague or quite similar terms with those used for the first question suggesting a confusion, or unclear meanings.

For other respondents (representing 9.2 percent of total) PD means mainly the control over life, while for few others means a change (1.8 percent), respective independence and progress on their own, i.e. to work harder without the help of others, to rely on their own forces (1.2 percent).

The distribution of the answers is graphically represented in the figure 1 and figure 2.

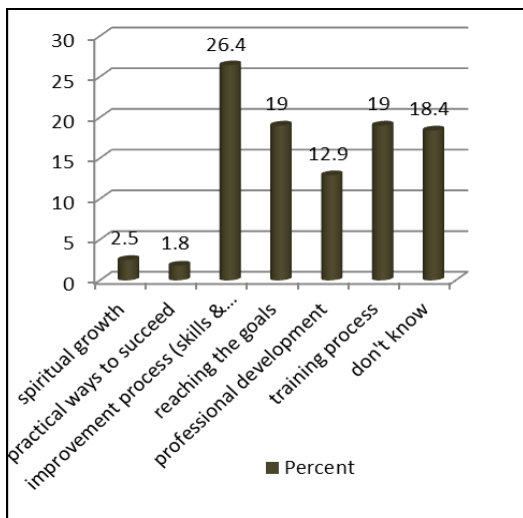


Figure 1. Distribution of answers to Q1

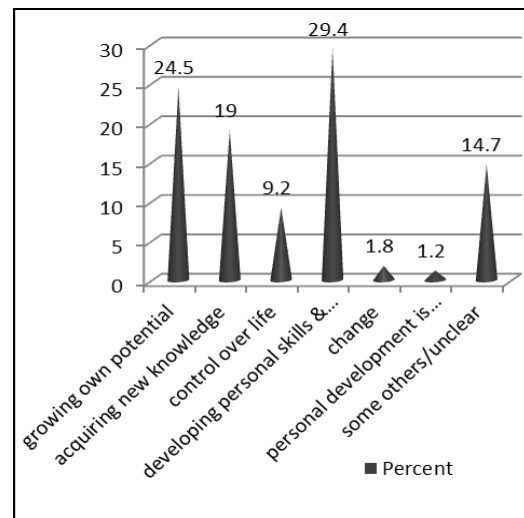


Figure 2. Distribution of answers to Q2

The third question (Q3) was aimed to reveal the willingness and capability of the respondents to involve in PD, on regular basis – estimated by the available time that each can and is ready to allocate for this purpose during a month. In this case, the answers suggest that the majority of respondents are less willing and/or ready for this, about 35 percent could allocate maximum 10 hours/month, and 25.8 percent between 30 and 100 hours/month, while only 19 percent could allocate over 100 hours/month.

For the fourth question, the answers were as expected more various but with a quite surprisingly proportion of respondents – almost a quarter – who seem to don't know what topics would meet their needs. The frequency of the prevalent answers for the rest of respondents was as follows:

- 29.4 percent - continuous improvement;
- 16 percent - psychology/motivation;
- 8.6 percent - change of lifestyle, mentality, etc;
- 6.1 percent - decision problems;
- 5.5 percent - improving quality of life;
- 4.9 percent - self-knowledge, managing emotions;
- 3.7 percent - conflict solving;
- 1.2 percent - philosophy.

We noted a somewhat similar distribution of the answers to the fifth question, in the sense that over 18 percent of total respondents answered quite uncertain i.e. they don't have clear expectations about the effects/results from which could benefit after attending a PD program. The rest of the answers were grouped within the following categories of prevalent expectations/results are:

- 25.2 percent - to acquire new knowledge;
- 14.7 percent - to learn what is needed in practice and how to apply;
- 14.7 percent - to gain self-confidence;
- 14.1 percent - to improve the professional background;
- 6.7 percent - to relax, to feel more secure and satisfied;
- 4.3 percent - to answer for personal questions;
- 1.8 percent - to effectively use available time.

For the fourth and fifth questions, we present the distribution of the answers in the figure 3 and respective in the figure 4.

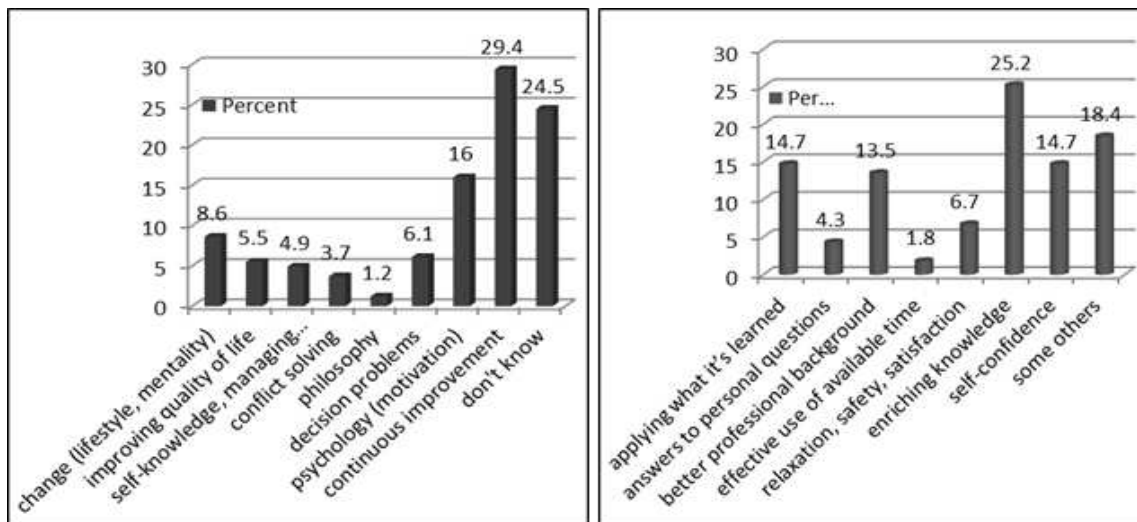


Figure 3. Distribution of answers to Q4

Figure 4. Distribution of answers to Q5

PD may involve multiple forms of learning in order to acquire and apply knowledge, skills, and awareness of self, as required for the process of change, but some may be perceived as being apart from the common ones of traditional education, for example the various forms of arts. The final question (Q6) was addressed for this purpose, revealing that almost a half of respondents consider the development by the means of arts a good idea (27 percent), or something useful/effective (20.2 percent). The answers were more diverse, but we may mention that 14.7 percent of respondents have emphasized the contribution to emotional development, while a cumulative percentage of 17,7 percent referred to this in terms of relaxation, of creativity, of helping or facilitate. However, about 20.2 percent of total answers suggested that respondents don't know or don't realize of how development through arts could give them some real benefits.

As an overall concluding remark, our study revealed that despite an expected common concern of the master students in Human Resource Management, their perceptions on PD reflects rather a limited understanding of the concept, to only the few from the many facets of the complex process of self-changing. Apparently it's missing the perspective of "whole" and the component of awareness of self, especially as concerning the will and capability to initiate and manage a purposeful change leading to PD in the sense defined by Waters: change of self, by self, for self.

The practical implications at organizational level arise from the fact that organizations are, in essence, groups of people performing various activities within an economic established setting, so that any capability of an organization - including that of adapting to the rapid global change - depends on capabilities and willingness of self-change of its members. Eventually, it's about adapting through PD.

The need of PD is common to all the people either they are Easterners, or Westerners. For this reason, perhaps could be more useful to concentrate the concerns for finding managerial approaches able to sustain this common need of the people within organizations. Managing the self-change processes of individual members of organizations in a purposeful way, so as they to see the change not as something imposed by owners or managers but as a resultant of some mutual efforts consistent with their personal need of development, could mitigate the differences and apparent dilemma between East and West.

Notes

*Our acknowledgments for permission given by Liliana Munteanu, psychologist, and for contribution to gathering the data by Cristina Nanu, graduate student.

**This work was partially supported by the strategic grant POSDRU 107/1.5/S/77265 (2010) of the Ministry of Labor, Family and Social Protection, Romania, co-financed by the European Social Fund – Investing in people.

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