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Conceptual Framework for Using Computers to Enhance Employee Engagement in Large Offices

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Conceptual Framework for Using Computers to Enhance Employee Engagement in Large Offices

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Abstract

Using computers to engage with staff members on their organization's Employer of Choice (EOC) program as part of a human resource development (HRD) framework can add real value to that organization's reputation. EOC is an evolving principle for Australian business. It reflects the value and importance organizations place on their key stakeholders, their staff members, and is a vital cog in HRD systems. This article aims to define EOC for Australian business conditions, expand on the valuable contribution employee engagement and interpersonal trust can add to risk management within an organization, and illustrate how information and communication technology provides an ideal and existing platform to educate a large office-based staff about their organization's EOC program, underpinning a culture for a learning organization. Many organizations are working hard to acquire EOC status, as EOC programs are one way of addressing employee requirements. Australia has recently been through a 10-year period of low unemployment that resulted in a job seekers' market mentality, enabling employees and job seekers to look beyond monetary incentive in employment to include aligning work culture with their individual beliefs on corporate, environmental, and social responsibility. This article reviews the benefits of a more engaging process for information management with staff members on their EOC opportunities and conceptualizes a model curriculum delivered through computer-assisted learning on an organization's EOC program. The literature reviewed embraces the constructivist and andragogy principles on adult learning through prior experience and knowledge that may enable individually tailored education for large office-based staff.

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Keywords

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Introduction

It has been observed that Employer of Choice (EOC) has gained popularity since the year 2000 and represents a whole new design of corporate culture as part of organizational development (Herman & Gioia, 2004; McLean, 2006)). This observation is supported by research, which demonstrates that gaining EOC status is an emerging and critical part of successful businesses in terms of external reputation and strategic management of employee satisfaction (see, e.g., Environmental Protection Authority Victoria, 2005; Fracaro, 2005; Herman & Gioia, 2004; Human Resources, 2005; IBM Business Consulting Services, 2005; Kahler, 2005; Price-WaterhouseCoopers, 2002).

Increasingly, organizations have to find meaningful ways of responding to employee needs, along with remaining ahead of the pack in terms of framing human resource development (HRD) as a means of retaining EOC within the organization's culture (Hewitt, 2003; Zheng, Qu, & Yang, 2009). Organizational development, as defined by McLean (2006), includes activities and processes that have the potential to develop desired outcomes, including productivity, interpersonal relationships, knowledge, expertise, staff satisfaction, and income. Building a culture of organizational development—using knowledge management through meaningful and responsible engagement with staff members by way of communication and education about their organization's EOC program—is a vital tool for sustaining employee commitment, attracting quality job applicants and enhancing business reputation (Cho, Cho, & McLean, 2009; Hewitt, 2003; Zheng et al., 2009).

Information and communication technology (ICT) is the most accessible and available medium for communicating with external and internal stakeholders of large organizations (Harrison, 2007; Eunson, 2005). ICT incorporates computer and social media technology that enables effective management of information across large organizations (Eunson, 2005; Harrison, 2007).

ICT, especially computers, can effectively be used as an HRD tool to deliver computer-assisted learning (CAL) as a means of engaging with staff and transferring information about their organization's employee benefits and "good" employer practices (Reiser, 2001a; Reynoldson & Vibert, 2006). However, for this medium to be effective in making employees aware of their EOC opportunities, consideration must be given to pedagogical design in keeping with adult learning principles, as well as the objectives of the HRD framework. A culture of learning within an organization must attend to the needs and abilities of the employees it is planned to provide knowledge for (Song, Kim, & Kolb, 2009).

Protecting an organization's reputation is particularly important in Australia in terms of staff attraction and organizational commitment, as the country has recently experienced 10 years of buoyant employment. EOC plays a vital role in making staff reputation champions for their organization (Campbell, 2004). A learning and development process on EOC in the office can significantly contribute to this HRD process (Looi, Marusarz, & Baumruk, 2004).

This article focuses on teasing out the parameters of EOC within the Australian context and outlining how existing office technology can add to a culture of organizational development through informing staff members about their organization's EOC program, cultivating a strong commitment for the organization from within. The article presents a comprehensive outline of considerations in the design of an office-based computer-assisted curriculum for an organization's EOC program within the HRD framework.

Methods

Two methods were used to support this conceptual article:

1. Literature reviews of definitions and criteria for EOC, incorporating government legislation and policy aligned with responsible employer practices and current criteria used by "best employer" rating agencies.
2. Literature review of education principles aligned with constructivism and adult learning principles and its relationship with CAL in a large office environment.

Literature reviews relating to EOC and the emergence of the concept from a business perspective concentrated on contemporary published research. Keywords used in the search of academic journals, business books, and industry journals included *employer of choice*, *employee opportunities*, *good employer practices*, and *best employer*. Although searches returned a broad spectrum of information relating to the keywords, the scope of the review was limited to internationally recognized research houses and consultancy groups, such as KPMG, Ashridge Centre, PriceWaterhouseCoopers, IBM, universities, and government documents (Appendix A).

Surveys were conducted on global communication addressing rating and certification by agencies who rate organizations on their employee opportunities and good employer practices toward staff (Appendix B).

Surveys were also conducted on documents and Web sites relating to policies, legislation, and regulations in line with identified criteria on what constitutes good employee and work practices released by Australian governments, regulators, and industry associations (Appendix C). Internationally recognized business standards and memberships relating to good employer practice were reviewed (Appendix D)

in order to cross-compare with the above-mentioned Australian regulations and standards.

For this article, office education design through CAL is explored in line with the constructivist and andragogy theories, which align constructing understanding from past experience and practical application with recognized pedagogy in adult education and training for lifelong learning. These principles align with the objectives and learner needs of an EOC awareness program for office-based staff.

Terminology relating to business training and human resource development needs to be clarified for the purpose of this article. CAL (sometimes referred to as ICT-enabled education) refers to the use of ICT technology as a means of supporting a curriculum, which involves a broader framing than computer-based instruction (Dalgarno, 2001; Fuller & Unwin, 2005). Computer-based training and computer-based instruction relate to the use of computers as the primary means of delivering training and education without a live instructor (Horton, 2000; Lowe & Holton, 2005). Online, or Web-based, education relates to using the Internet to supplement the classification of the curriculum for computer-based learning (Horton, 2000). It should be noted that CAL may encompass computer-based training.

Contemporary EOC Defined

A succinct, consistent, and definitive explanation for the concept of EOC is not evident in current academic, industry, and public discussion papers addressing EOC for Australian organizations. This is therefore explored to frame the criteria necessary for an HRD system to exist that addresses an organization's EOC opportunities and engagement.

In Australia, EOC has typically been associated with recruitment and strategies to attract and retain staff (Drucker, 1999; Herman & Gioia, 2004; Leary-Joyce, 2004). Traditionally, North American EOC status has been narrowly aligned with employee benefits, including health plans and recruitment incentives (Ahlrichs, 2000; Fishman, 1998). More recently, EOC has evolved and expanded globally to be viewed as "best practice in industry" for employment conditions driven by international acknowledgment and awards. Criteria assessed include employee opportunities, sustainable culture, public reputation, and desirable qualities like facilities and support networks that make organizations attractive employers (Great Place to Work, 2005; Hewitt, 2003; Hull & Read, 2003; PriceWaterhouseCoopers, 2002; see Appendix A).

A number of studies, such as "Best Employers to Work for in Australia" (Hewitt, 2003), "What Makes a Best Employer Global Study" (Looi et al., 2004), "Simply the Best Workplaces in Australia" (Hull & Read, 2003), "Global Human Capital Survey 2002/3" (PriceWaterhouseCoopers, 2002), and "The Capability Within—The Global Human Capital Study 2005" (IBM Business Consulting Services, 2005), have addressed essential criteria for running a successful EOC program in Australia (see Appendices A and B).

The identified criteria essential for EOC under Australian business conditions includes leadership and interrelationships, safety, well-being, staff development, opportunity, inclusion, community involvement, financial education, and sustainable practice. According to Hull and Read (2003), leadership and interrelationships are criteria that are pivotal to a successful EOC program. The criterion of interpersonal relationships is also identified by McLean (2006) as key to developing a culture of organizational development.

Many of these EOC criteria reflect the broader concept of an organization's being environmentally, socially, communally, and financially responsible (Suggett & Goodsir, 2002). Therefore, EOC for within an organization may be judged against the degree to which that organization exercises corporate social responsibility (CSR; see Appendix A).

CSR has recently been identified as modern business meeting obligations from increasingly demanding ethical, environmental, legal, commercial, and public standards, as defined by wider society (Crane, Spence, & Matten, 2007). The fundamental idea behind CSR is that business has an obligation to work for social betterment (Haugland Smith & Nystad, 2006). A commonly accepted understanding of CSR practice can be drawn from the five pillars of CSR strategy, which include business ethics, employee relations, human rights, community investment, and environmental sustainability (ExperienceCSR, 2003). How these five pillars are applied internally as part of organizational culture make up the foundation of a solid corporately responsible organization. The internal management of these strategies is aligned with an organization's EOC program.

Therefore, EOC can be viewed from two perspectives: the employer's perspective, that is, CSR strategies safeguarding effective operations for a business, and the employee's perspective, that is, CSR strategies securing an employee's commitment to the business and interpersonal trust (Song et al., 2009; Suggett & Goodsir, 2002). EOC encompasses the internal policies and practices that ensure the organization's culture is corporately responsible for its operations and the resulting effects on all stakeholders, including customers, shareholders, government, and the organization's primary asset—its employees (Abbott, 2003; Fels, 2003).

Protecting Reputation Through EOC

An organization's reputation is an important asset that needs to be protected. Staff loyalty and organizational commitment may play an integral role in enhancing an organization's external reputation (Bright, 2005; Post, 2004). Engaging with staff through the HRD system about their EOC program creates intrinsic value and can lead to heightened loyalty and commitment (Cho et al., 2009; Looi et al., 2004). Contented and dedicated staff members, through their interaction with external stakeholders, reflect the employer's desired brand (Post, 2004).

Business reputation extends beyond financial performance for shareholders and incorporates performance with regards to all stakeholders, including employees,

government, community, and consumers or clients (Fombrun, 2005; Global Reporting Initiative [GRI], 2002; Suggett & Goodsir, 2002). Internal EOC programs framed within an HRD system can deliver intangible benefits of brand enhancement and better staff morale, fortifying corporate responsibility and strengthening business reputation (Bright, 2005).

Australian companies recognize the importance of business reputation and the benefits of providing a solid foundation in EOC policy and practice that aid in addressing human resources issues, as evidenced in Appendices A and B. This development is influenced by factors such as international laws and trends in relation to EOC practice (Appendix D), corporate responsibilities, Australian government legislation relating to EOC criteria, and risk management (Appendix C). Recent global campaigns for open and accountable behavior from organizations have resulted in increased government regulations on reporting and responsible behavior.

Employer Branding—Australian Study

A 2006 survey conducted by the Bernard Hodes Global Network in conjunction with Adcorp found that 48% of companies across Australia and New Zealand plan to implement formal employer branding programs framed within the organizational development strategy within 5 years (compared to 57% globally). Human Resources (HR) professionals are considered primarily responsible for employer branding initiatives, with 79% of companies reporting HR as one of the key stakeholders in employer brand management. Employers are starting to realize that they have to strategically manage and communicate their employer brand to compete in the candidate marketplace (Human Resources Leader, 2006).

Attracting and Retaining Staff Through EOC

Two other key HR issues for the current Australian workforce are the "job-seekers market" mentality to employment as a result of 10 years of buoyant employment and employee burnout (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS], 2009; Fracaro, 2005).

The Australian unemployment rate of 4.3% was at 30-year lows in February 2008, resulting in creating a job-seekers market mentality. Even after experiencing the global credit crunch, the unemployment rate had risen only 1.5% until August 2009, underpinning the perceived strength of the Australian economy and job market (ABS, 2009). The U.S. unemployment rate for the same period had jumped from 4.8% to 9.5% (United States Department of Labor [DOL], 2009). A job-seekers market mentality allows a mindset where the workforce considers a broader range of issues other than financial remuneration, including work–life balance, CSR, and development opportunities when contemplating employment (Fracaro, 2005). In Australia, the annual staff turnover had leapt from around 11% in 2005, to more than 18% in March 2008 (Schneiders, 2008).

The retention and attraction of effective staff can successfully be managed through providing a working environment conducive to employee needs and preferences. The risk of employee burnout can also be managed through HRD systems and policies supporting staff safety, work–life balance, health, flexibility, and recognition of individuality in the workplace (Lawrence, 2001). Research by Hudson Australia and New Zealand showed that 47% of employees rated perceived poor work–life balance as a key trigger to seek alternative employment, and 42% were willing to sacrifice a percentage of their current salary to improve their work–life balance (Human Resources, 2007).

Building an EOC Culture and Managing Risk

A large organization is capable of managing employee risks identified above through a well-planned HRD system that comprehensively addresses EOC. Employers can develop a culture of employee engagement by using the available technology to help employees understand the benefits of their EOC program. As Looi et al. (2004) have stated, intangible benefits like employee opportunities, corporate responsibility, and environmental accountability are enthusiastically considered by prospective and present employees as determinants in the choice of an employer. This evidence is backed up by a Gallup study (Buckingham & Coffman, 1999) of 80,000 managers that concludes that the greatest drivers of employee engagement and organizational commitment are intangible assets and the way managers relate to employees.

"Organizational wealth is increasingly attributable to 'soft forms' of capital—reputation, trust, good will, image and relationships" (Post, 2004, p. 13). These intangible assets, which have their origins in organizational development, deliver a degree of value to a company (Cho et al., 2009). A recent Accenture Consultancy worldwide survey supported this theory, with 96% of executives polled believing intangibles are important to their company and 50% believing they are among the top three issues the firm faces. Industry researchers believe that between 30% and 60% of a publicly listed company's value lies in its intangibles (Post, 2004).

EOC framed within HRD systems deliver intangible benefits of brand enhancement and better staff morale, fortifying corporate responsibility and strengthening business reputation (Bright, 2005). A recent study of 100 European companies shows that loss of reputation is viewed as the second biggest threat after business interruptions (Corporate Public Affairs, 2003). A most comprehensive and empiric social responsibility study, titled "Corporate Social and Financial Performance: A Metaphysical Analysis," draws from 52 previous research studies and 33,878 observations (O'Halloran, 2005). The study concluded that good companies perform well and that the increasing power of activists and media make companies' nonmarket strategies toward intangible assets even more important (O'Halloran, 2005).

Such intangible considerations make it all the more imperative that organizations consign depth of thought and effort into designing their EOC awareness programs. An

organizational culture of employee engagement exercised from the top down addresses many of the intangible benefits and is a central concept to HRD (Zheng et al., 2009). EOC programs can succeed in making an organization's staff its reputation champions and may mitigate the risks of diminished organizational commitment and a weakened corporate brand (Campbell, 2004).

Educating Employees From Within

The knowledge worker is a powerful resource in terms of increasing the intellectual capital of an organization and improving the productivity and viability of the operation (Drucker, 1989). Employee learning and development through staff education is a key component of HRD (Nyhan, Cressey, Kelleher, Poell, & Tomassini, 2004). Staff education is fundamental in terms of safety, productivity, lifelong learning, communication, and effective people policies (Harrison, 2007; Nyhan et al., 2004; Work Safe Victoria, 2004). Knowledge management is now considered an asset advanced through HRD systems and is inherently linked to developing an organization (Cho et al., 2009).

According to Green (1998), adults often seek out learning opportunities they can use to better their position or make a change for the better. Kuchinke (1999) refers to the theory of person-centered HRD, which emphasizes developing the individual's needs and goals with an aim of enhancing the productivity capabilities of the individual within the organization. Voluntary participation in awareness programs on EOC are motivated intrinsically by staff desire to engage with their organization's employee benefits, development opportunities, and work–life balance practices (Campbell, 2004).

Therefore, HRD systems play an important role in the operations of an organization through the education of individuals on the opportunities available through the EOC program (Hewitt, 2003; Nyhan et al., 2004; Song et al., 2009).

Such an HRD system operating in an office environment would need to be capable of educating large office-based staff numbers en masse and have the flexibility to adapt organizational development to the evolving culture and work patterns of the business (Zheng et al., 2009; McLean, 2006). Adult learning principles addressing key motivations to learn, such as relevance, abilities, convenience, and self-assurance in the process, are vital to the success of employee education (Green, 1998). Staff members must also feel part of the HRD process through the provision of feedback. Constructivism and andragogy best suit the characteristics of the office learners, in terms of building on prior knowledge and experience and accommodating new knowledge in line with the motivation of the learner (Dalgarno, 2001; Green, 1998; Knowles, 1984; Vygotsky, 1962).

Constructivism complements the blend of constructs of reality for the diverse backgrounds typical of a large-office staff (Dalgarno, 2001; Eunson, 2005). Constructivist theory is based on individuals generating meaning and knowledge from past

experience. Knowledge from new experiences is accommodated and assimilated into existing frameworks aligned with the individual's internal representation of the world. Each individual representation is equally valid (Bruner, 1990; Dalgarno, 2001; Vygotsky, 1962).

The principal theory of andragogy, which recognizes that adults' reasons for learning are different from those of young people, corresponds well with the autonomous and self-directed learning model associated with online education in the office environment (Knowles, 1984). Andragogy considers the social context of the learner and allows for a balance of responsibilities, understands the motivation of purpose from an adult perspective, and the importance of integration of new information with previous experience and current knowledge (Green, 1998).

The existence of ICT resources already available in the majority of large-office environments supports the emergence of CAL as a logical solution to delivering a holistic HRD system, which informs staff members about their employee opportunities and in-house culture (Dalgarno, 2001; Davis, 2002; Reynoldson & Vibert, 2006).

CAL

Many logistical issues associated with office-based HRD resource tools can be addressed by using ICT. CAL complements the practical application of information technology networks that typically exist in large and developed organizations (Herrera, 2003). A CAL resource used to facilitate the development of an EOC education program has the ability to be a cost-effective HRD tool that can operate successfully under office conditions in large organizations. The CAL resource will not only provide EOC information for users but also have the capacity to pinpoint areas requiring further development. This can lead to a more complete and progressive HRD system incorporating EOC.

However, CAL is but one medium for addressing awareness of an organization's EOC program. CAL can efficiently be introduced into an office environment as a formalized approach to EOC development (Reynoldson & Vibert, 2006). Kaye's (1994) Adult Communication Management Model links levels of intrapersonal communication with systems and competence, which complements a blended approach to office education incorporating CAL, face-to-face communication, and personal research. Adults learn and communicate through a variety of mediums and stimuli, with ICT being a universally accepted mode of professional communication in an office environment (Harrison, 2007).

CAL has the capacity to address the four key elements of adult learning principles (Green, 1998; Knowles, 1984): self-directed learning through problem solving, integration of prior experience with new information, relevance, and information readily usable to the receiver.

Many theorists, including Dalgarno (2001), Green (1998), Knowles (1984), and Kaye (1994), are advocates of adult learning principles that balance against constructivists'

beliefs on acquiring knowledge and learner-centered delivery, which draws on prior knowledge to construct meaning (Collins, 2008). Reynoldson and Vibert (2006) align these adult learning principles against ICT capabilities.

ICT, through CAL, has the pedagogical capabilities to be an effective instrument for HRD systems that can genuinely facilitate learning and extend added value (Herrera, 2003; Martin, Massy, & Clarke, 2003). These pedagogical dimensions are concerned with the aspects of design and implementation of computer-assisted development that directly affects learning (Martin et al., 2003; Reeves, 1992). Real value can be added to an organization's internal culture and employee engagement by using visually rich means of instruction, direct links between business and learning, and taking practice from abstraction to realism through computer instruction (Reynoldson & Vibert, 2006).

Reynoldson and Vibert (2006) have identified seven distinctive capabilities of ICT-enabled education that complement an office environment: flexibility, customization, practicable lifelong learning, borderless education, visualization and simulation, business in the classroom, and theory–practice nexus. These capabilities complement the demographic characteristics of Australian office workers, including information technology capabilities, variety in learning styles, a need for lifelong learning and transferable knowledge, and practical application (Arnold, 2008; Fuller & Unwin, 2005; Reeves & Reeves, 1997; Reiser, 2001a).

A Framework for EOC Within HRD

The primary objective of an HRD system incorporating EOC using ICT is to provide ongoing access for staff regarding information on their business's employee programs and operations, including the capacity for ongoing upgrading of this information and feedback mechanisms. Considering the adult learner demographics of office staff, it is important for employees to operate within the instruction model for adult learning competencies, including self-directed learning, transformational learning, and drawing on prior knowledge and experience that facilitates learning from knowing (Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007).

The EOC competencies that need to be addressed, which have been identified by the above-mentioned research as what constitutes good employer practice for Australian conditions, includes accepted practice for leadership and interrelationships, guidance on safety and well-being concerns, staff development opportunities, inclusion policies, community involvement opportunities and culture, relevant financial education, and sustainability values for the organization.

A secondary objective is cultivating an inclusive culture where staff members sense ownership over the curriculum content and are not threatened by unfamiliar navigation (Collins, 2008). The guiding principles in curriculum design for a computer-assisted HRD system includes learner-focused EOC content, online access, familiar navigation, opportunity for external research, authenticity, reflection of brand and values,

Table 1. HRD relating to EOC through CAL

Desired EOC characteristic	Related employee issues	Delivered through CAL on intranet	Opportunity for development (including external links)
Leadership and interrelationships	• Consistency of management • Decision-making process • Professional conduct and expectations • Organizational values	• Organizational chart • Mission and values statements • Codes of conduct • Organizational strategy • Role expectations • Governance platform	• CEO podcast site • Communication channels • News and information • Forums/in-house blog site • Feedback mechanisms • Question box for executives
Safety	• Physical safety • Psychological safety • Job security	• Instructions • Expectations • Assistance schemes • Behavior management process • Logbook and reporting • Support officers	• Graphic demonstrations • Testimonies • Links to other organizations • Safety progress and records • Mentoring contacts • List of responsibilities
Well-being	• Health education • Facilities • Work–life balance • Family-friendly practices	• Facts and information • Policies • Contact points • Counseling support	• Connection to staff interest groups • Social and fitness opportunities • Online health information
Staff development	• Training and development • Lifelong learning	• Education support • Staff training • Reward and recognition	• Online training facilities • Links to further information • Personal development opportunities and courses
Opportunity	• Advancement • Promotion • Cross skilling	• Organizational levels • Required skills and qualifications	• Vacancies • Social media • Interteam connections
Inclusion	• EEO policy • Facilities • Support network	• Stated policies • Floor plans • Interpretive services • Cultural considerations	• Appropriate roles register • Celebration of diversity • Workplace stories • Suggestion box

(continued)

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Table 1. (continued)

Desired EOC characteristic	Related employee issues	Delivered through CAL on intranet	Opportunity for development (including external links)
Community involvement	• Stakeholder management • Community involvement • Community connections	• Stakeholder engagement—expectations and opportunities • Community programs	• Community projects • Open-door practices • Stakeholder engagement guidelines and suggestions
Sustainable practice	• Environmental practice • Corporate citizenship • Social awareness	• Environmental performance • Staff opportunities and volunteering	• Volunteer opportunities • Sustainable practice—information and tips • Suggestion box
Financial education	• Remuneration structure • Retirement plans • Financial packaging • Affiliations • Financial literacy	• Available retirement plans • Responsible money management • Taxation • Salary packaging	• Financial literacy courses • Podcasts on money matters • Access to financial information online • In-house financial guidance

Source: Gill (2009).
Note: EOC = employer of choice; CAL = computer-assisted learning; EEO = equal employment opportunity.

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open feedback, site-usage data, and the opportunity for further development through integration with other modes of education.

A key focus is for employees to recognize the intrinsic value of the information in relation to their work experiences. "Curriculum is thought of in terms of activity and experience rather than of knowledge to be acquired and facts to be stored in" (Edwards & Kelly, 1998, p. 1). Many theorists and academics have prescribed models of curricula. However, Print's (1993) dynamic model associates well with the perceived learners and their input into the curriculum. This complements the constructivist belief that each individual constructs his or her own representation of knowledge drawing on his or own experiences, and everyone's construction of knowledge is equally valid (Bruner, 1990; Dalgarno, 2001).

The content, known as the classification, should typically contain information on the criteria for being an EOC for the host business in line with the key objective of the EOC education system. This classification should address HR issues regarding effective people policies relating to internal and external relationships, occupational health and safety, learning, community involvement, environmental conscience, and financial security (Herman & Gioia, 2004; Hull & Read, 2003; Looi et al., 2004). It links with the policy and procedures for that organization and should permit access to external (online) Web sites for expanded information, allowing for individual interpretation and aiding lifelong learning (Arnold, 2008).

It is important that the HRD tool create authentic activities in keeping with the values and ethics associated with the employer-of-choice principles of particular companies. This is consistent with constructivist theorists who believe learner-centered education is the most effective way to learn (Bruner, 1990; Dalgarno 2001; Reiser, 2001b; Vygotsky, 1962). Constructivists base learning on building on prior knowledge, presenting information within a context to relate to prior experience and learner activity rather than teacher instruction (Dalgarno, 2001). Reiser, citing Dick (2001b), points out that authentic learning tasks that echo the complexity of the real-world environment in which learners will utilize their skills need to be reflected in instructional design and adaptation of computer-assisted HRD systems.

The design of the EOC curriculum, in order to remain authentic to the organizational development objectives, should include input from a selection of stakeholders, including senior management, staff members, and external contractors. Because of the nature of the content, input is required from HR, public relations, and those associated with corporate governance and social responsibility (Human Resources, 2005; IBM Business Consulting Services, 2005). The updating of the HRD system relating to EOC as a result of feedback or industry developments should be overseen by the formation of a curriculum committee involving employees who are in touch with staff sentiments and issues (Liu, 2001).

Keeping screen design as an extension of the branding of the company's desktop face allows the tool to remain aesthetically pleasing to management and familiar to staff. The program forms part of the business's communication system, not an alien

tool external to the operations of the business. The cognitive load can remain manageable because of employees' intuitively using the directory to access information they desire directly. Mapping in the system should follow normal host–intranet procedure so users can avoid disorientation and view where they have previously visited. Familiarity with the style in which information is presented ensures staff members are comfortable with the navigation within the system (Reeves & Reeves, 1997).

A key aim for such an HRD system is to provide direction to facilitate further development and expansion of the EOC education program. Education strategies can be developed to address specifically identified areas for improvement and provide staff members with an opportunity for extended learning by expanding knowledge on identified interest areas (Nyhan et al., 2004). This may occur through upgrading system content and/or through other more traditional modes of education, including training, lecturing, and face-to-face learning.

Potential Barriers to Effective Instruction Through CAL

Despite the numerous advantages outlined within this article, a few challenges present themselves in the use of ICT (CAL) as an HRD tool in the office. First, without a trainer or facilitator on hand to answer questions and give immediate feedback, staff may have difficulty completely understanding the learning material (Alley & Jansak, 2001). Trained educators can recognize when learning is taking place under the right abstraction, something that programmed instruction from computers is unable to identify.

Staff can be faced with new technology pathways and may lack the confidence to self-navigate through instruction and knowledge, without the presence of training and a facilitator (Merriam et al., 2007).

In addition, asynchronous communication (email and bulletin posting) often leaves users feeling isolated and unimportant (Alley & Jansak, 2001). Response times to queries are often delayed and may have the effect of minimizing the urgency and importance of the inquiry. Computer instruction cannot utilize the intuition of emotional intelligence and make an assessment on individual circumstances at a given time, which may result in further feelings of isolation and distancing from the instruction process (Merriam et al., 2007).

Unsupervised online education may also lead to unnecessary and distracted browsing on the Web (Dalgarno, 2001), resulting in tangent investigations and divergence of focus from the core task, decreasing overall productivity (Davis, 2002). And the very notion of online education and work–life balance can be reversed as employees may blur the boundaries between work and personal life because of the accessibility of information from outside the office (Davis, 2002). Inefficient browsing and additional intranet files could be adding further detail to an already overloaded information system.

CAL in an office environment is heavily dependent on self-motivation and personal preference, which might play a role in the augmentation of knowledge sharing and the quest for further information and may result in skewing from the true purpose of the knowledge acquisition (Hendriks, 1999).

The cost of technology and support can also be a barrier to effective CAL education. However, the intention of this system is aimed at large Australian organizations, which commonly have in place the required technology and hardware.

Conclusion

This article's main aim had been to determine what constitutes EOC, particularly for the Australian context, and to show that a practical solution for enhancing HRD can be achieved through educating staff members on their organization's EOC opportunities via existing office technology. EOC addressed through HRD systems can be a valuable resource for strengthening employer brand, which in turn has the potential to mitigate the risks of staff losses and an unfavorable reputation.

EOC reflects the value and importance an organization places on its key stakeholder—its employees. It is clear that organizations that invest in HRD are perceived to be better places to work and are more likely to retain key staff members and outperform other organizations on financial measures (Hewitt, 2003).

An effective HRD system that educates staff, management, and business-policy designers about their organization's employee opportunities may contribute to enhancing employer brand both internally and externally. The first step to developing and articulating an EOC brand is taken internally, through an organization's greatest ambassadors—the staff (Australian Institute of Management, 2004). Staff members are then enabled to be ambassadors for their employer.

The design of the EOC component of an HRD system proposed in this article and the associated opportunities for further education on EOC harmonize with adult learning principles. Dewar (1999), citing Bundage and MacKeracher, notes that adult learning is facilitated when the learner's representation and interpretation of his or her own experiences are accepted as valid, acknowledged as an essential aspect influencing change and respected as a potential resource for learning. This CAL model within an HRD system allows for autonomous and self-directed learning, applies value to the learner's prior knowledge and experience, is goal oriented, is directly relevant to the user's business environment, respects opinion and feedback, and has practical applications (Goodlands, 1995).

The next phase of research would be to implement such a CAL model on EOC into organizations and collect empirical data relating to its effectiveness as part of the HRD system by measuring staff satisfaction and resultant external reputation for the organization. A second consideration for further research might be to investigate the effects of rising unemployment rates due to the 2008-2009 global financial crisis and the resulting influence on motivations toward employer branding and feelings of job security.

Appendix A
Global Studies on Employer of Choice (EOC) Criteria

Study	Year	Countries, organizations, sample	Summary research	Findings relevant to EOC
The PriceWaterhouseCoopers Global Human Capital Survey	2002-2003	1,056 organizations 47 countries	Identify people management practices and outcomes linked to financial performance	• Effective people policies • Employee performance assessment • Measuring employee satisfaction • Corporate social responsibility reporting • Training and development opportunities • Competitive employment conditions • Occupational health and safety policies • Productive employment relations • Support for migrant talent
Good Employee Practices Are Good for Your Business (illustrating evidence from the updated "Firm Foundations—Business Practices and Performance" study undertaken by the Department of Labour in New Zealand, 2001)	2003	New Zealand 3,378 firms and organizations with six or more employees in New Zealand 48 site visits	Key issues to consider in moving a business to a more competitive position	• Business leaders had a deep relationship with stakeholders • Employee welfare was addressed • Employee reward and recognition for staff • Comprehensive values program • Internal and external training • Assessment of employee satisfaction
The State of Corporate Citizenship in the United States 2003 (conducted by the Center for Corporate Citizenship at Boston College and the U.S. Chamber of Commerce Center for Corporate Citizenship)	2003	United States 515 executives	State of corporate citizenship Attitudes, expectations, and commitment of small-, medium-, and large-business executives toward corporate citizenship	• 75% believed internal corporate values critical • 74% corporate citizenship a public expectation • 46% placed great importance on employee resources and improving conditions • 82% believed corporate citizenship programs improved bottom-line profits

(continued)

Appendix A (continued)

Study	Year	Countries, organizations, sample	Summary research	Findings relevant to EOC
The Strategic Plan for Addressing the Communication for Employer of Choice (developed by the University of Idaho)	2000	United States Strategic plan for addressing communication of EOC	Extensive research into criteria for EOC to establish a communication program for EOC criteria	• Diversity and human rights • Communication methods • Health and wellness • Development programs • Supportive working environment • Safe and secure environment • Preventive risk management
Management Challenges in the 21st Century (conducted by the Ashridge Centre for Business and Society)	2004	United Kingdom 500 senior managers	Deliver a balance between economic prosperity, environmental improvement, and social justice	Leadership, education, and work–life considered important factors in business policy
The New Business Responsibilities (conducted by the Ashridge Centre for Business and Society)	2001	United Kingdom 700 respondents (32% either chief executive, chair, or company director)	Identified key areas in HR for EOC: • Personnel policies • Pay and benefits • Recruitment • Staff satisfaction • Staff training	Key issues identified: • Work–life balance • Care of dependent relatives • Inclusion • Diversity • Sexual harassment • Organizational development • Workplace culture
IBM Global Human Capital Study	2005	300 organizations from 40 countries More than 100 chief human resources (HR) officers	Links between successful organizations and leading human capital practices	More successful organization are those that • source and manage talent in line with business strategy, • hold leadership accountable for development and growth of people are more successful,

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Appendix A (continued)

Study	Year	Countries, organizations, sample	Summary research	Findings relevant to EOC
KPMG International Survey of Corporate Responsibility Reporting	2005	Top 250 Global *Fortune 500* companies and top 100 from N100 list (including Australia)	Standard questionnaire	• utilize organizational knowledge effectively, • run HR like a business, and link HR results to business outcomes. Social issues: • 68% for diversity • 61% for equal opportunities • 51% for human rights • 72% for health and safety • 72% for training • 62% for working conditions • 32% for employee satisfaction
Simply the Best Workplaces in Australia (2001 study by Hull and Read, which was published by the Australian Centre for Industrial Relations Research and Training at the University of Sydney)	2003	Australia 16 workplaces from 10 companies with a diverse range of industries	"Quality working relationships represent the central pivot on which excellent workplaces are founded, underpinned by key variables such as good workplace leadership, clear values, having a say, and being safe." (Hull & Read 2003)	Fifteen key drivers in each of the leading workplaces: • Quality of working relationships • Workplace leadership • Having a say • Clear values • Being safe • Quality environment • Recruitment, pay, and conditions • Getting feedback • Autonomy and uniqueness • A sense of ownership and identity • Learning • Passion • Having fun • Community connections

Appendix B

Global Public Communication on EOC

Survey, Region	Award	Format	Survey criteria	Findings relevant to EOC
Great Place to Work Europe and United States	100 best companies to work for	• Randomly selected staff complete an employee attitude survey • Culture audit • Supply supporting documentation	• The relationship between employees and management • The relationship between employees and their jobs and company • The relationship between employees and other employees	*Fortune* magazine publishes the top 100 workplaces
The Hewitt "Best Employers" surveys Australia and New Zealand, Asia, Canada, Europe, India and Latin America	Research on people management—"Best Employers"	The Australasian survey gathers information from: • CEO questionnaire • Employee opinion survey • People practices inventory	• Philosophies and principles used to manage staff • Alignment of values and practices to an organization's strategy • Management and feedback mechanisms • Opportunities for development	• A connection to company and strategy • Solid senior leadership • Compelling promise to employees • Alignment of people practices to support • High-performance culture • Measurement and employee engagement "A definitive benchmark for participating organizations to measure how effective they are in engaging the intellectual and emotional commitment of their employees." (Hewitt, 2004)
The "Employer of choice for Women" citation Australia	Citation from Australian Government	Provide documentation for verification on policies supporting criteria	• Policies for support of women in the organization • Rights and obligations in place regarding sex-based harassment • Diversity	In 2005, 115 organizations had been granted the right for citation (Equal Opportunity for Women in the Workplace Agency, 2005).

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Appendix B (continued)

Survey, Region	Award	Format	Survey criteria	Findings relevant to EOC
			• Transparency • Inclusive organizational culture • People development	
HR Awards for Business Performance Australia	Employer of Choice Award	Assessments consisted of interviews with the chief executives and a random sample of managers and employees.	Nominations must address the following essential criteria in the submission: • Employee-centric culture • Career opportunities • Marketplace success • The link between HR and business strategy • Personal development opportunities • Performance management and measurement processes • Recognition of people as a competitive advantage	Desirable qualities include: • Lived values hardwired into performance management systems • Strong leadership • An inclusive management style • Flexible work practices • Demonstrable work–life integration • Reward and recognition program

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Appendix C

Australian Government and Industry Regulations Relating to EOC

Title	Type of regulation	Implications for EOC
Corporations Act Amendment Bill 2004 for the Corporations Act of 2001	Government act	• International law and the evolving legal environment for corporate social responsibility • Ministerial Council for Corporations will review the act • Attention given to new legal and social implications, for tabling in Federal Parliament • Amendment intends to place greater accountability on directors and chief executive officers of companies • Relates to all stakeholders, including employees, government, shareholders, community, and consumers and clients
Commonwealth of Australia Joint Parliamentary Inquiry into Corporate Social Responsibility 2005	Government inquiry	• Called for submissions from the public, including corporations, in September 2005 • Interest in corporate social responsibility reflects the global drive for increased awareness of corporate citizenship • Public meeting regarding the inquiry results is expected to be held late in 2005 • Initiative proposed by the government is to encourage using the Principle 7 ASX Corporate Governance Council guideline as a vehicle for greater environmental and socially responsible behavior • Principle to suggestions is that companies establish systems of risk oversight and management, and internal control
Australian Stock Exchange (ASX) Corporate Governance Council 2004	Recommendations, must be addressed by ASX listed companies	• Articulates 10 core principles that the ASX Corporate Governance Council believes underlie good corporate governance. • Recommendation for disclosure is a set of guidelines, not a prescription for reporting • ASX Listing Rule 4.10 companies are required to provide a statement in their annual reports disclosing the extent to which they have followed these best-practice recommendations in the reporting period

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Appendix C (continued)

Title	Type of regulation	Implications for EOC
CLERP 9, the Corporate Law Economic Reform Program (Audit Reform and Corporate Disclosure) Act 2004	Government act	• Put in place adequate measures, processes and procedures to meet the new obligations of the act • Especially regarding auditing and company financial reporting. • Chief executive officers and board members can now be held accountable for their business practices and the effects on stakeholders
Australian National Contact Points (ANCP) for the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development's "Guidelines for Multinational Enterprises"	Government obligation	• Part of Australia's obligation to ensure the effective implementation and promotion of the guidelines • Principally provides the advice and support to companies desiring to comply with the nonbinding recommendations addressed by the Australian Government (ANCP 2005). • Organizations are required to operate in accordance with the core criteria of visibility, accessibility, transparency, and accountability in accordance with the principle of "functional equivalence." • Obligations are achieved through publicizing the service charter, seminars, and consultation sessions on the guidelines, contributing formally to the resolution of issues, responding to inquiries about the guidelines, and ensuring that the guidelines are accessible to interested parties
Financial Services Reform Act 2000	Government act	• Fundamental changes to the Australian financial services industry leading to unprecedented levels of customer disclosure requirements and reporting to the corporate regulator, the Australian Securities and Investment Commission • Guidelines for the inclusion of information relating to labor standards and environmental, social, and ethical factors in the product disclosure statements of investment products (Policy Statement 168) • Financial product issuers are required to comply with the guidelines for all product disclosure statements
Occupational Health and Safety Act 1991	Covers all Commonwealth	• An employer must take all reasonably practicable steps to protect the health and safety at work of the employers' employees

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Appendix C (continued)

Title	Type of regulation	Implications for EOC
	Government departments and business enterprises	• Act covers all commonwealth government departments and business enterprises • Separate Commonwealth Act for the maritime industry
OHS State Acts (e.g., Victorian OHS Act 1985)	State government acts	• Workers are covered under their various OHS State Acts, e.g., Victorian OHS Act 1985 state OHS acts are constantly being tightened to ensure the safety and health for all employees • Victorian OHS Act, as a result of the Maxwell Report 2004, has recently been amended to incorporate greater governance accountability and higher fines for employers that breach the act • Recommends implementing a system of incentives and rewards for employers who comply with OHS obligations
Australian Competition and Consumer Commission (ACCC)	Independent Commonwealth statutory authority formed in 1995 to administer the Trade Practices Act 1974	• Independent Commonwealth statutory authority formed in 1995 to administer the Trade Practices Act 1974 and other acts • May legally investigate businesses for contraventions of the Trade Practices Act • Act includes reference relating to EOC, including consumers, suppliers, personal injury, severability, breaches of confidence, and competition • Court can determine whether a contravention of the Act has occurred and make orders against offenders • ACCC's role is to bring matters before the courts
Industrial Relations Reform	Australian Federal Coalition legislation	• Canvassed to remove all unfair dismissals from a state system to a federal system • Remove the powers of the Industrial Relations Commission to set minimum wages with the replacement of a specialist body and create a stronger focus on dispute resolution between employer and employee(s) with mediation • Increasing use of Australian Workplace Agreements • Potential employees may now consider broader determinants, including company work ethics, health and safety factors, and employee opportunities when considering a workplace agreement

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Appendix D

International Standards relating to EOC

Standard/ Membership	Country Origin	Implications for EOC
International Labor Organization	Global	• Promoting decent and productive work, in conditions of freedom, equity, security, and dignity • Eight core labor standards • Providing an important focus on the workplace and the conditions of work in the process of sustainable development
United Nations Global Compact	Global	• Membership to the compact is voluntary. • Key objective is to bring companies, labor, and civil society together with UN agencies to support universal environmental and social principles. • Advance the 10 universal principles in the areas of human rights, labor, the environment, and anticorruption. • Seeks to promote responsible corporate citizenship so that business can be part of the solution to the challenges of globalization
Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development	Global	• Guidelines for multinational enterprises • Recommendations that provide voluntary principles and standards for responsible business conduct • Develop internal programs, guidance, and management systems that underpin commitment to good corporate citizenship, good practices, and good business and employee conduct. • Guidelines aim to ensure that the operations of these enterprises are in harmony with government policies, to strengthen the basis of mutual confidence between enterprises and the societies in which they operate, to help improve the foreign investment climate, and to enhance the contribution to sustainable development made by multinational enterprises • Also provide voluntary principles and standards for responsible business conduct consistent with applicable laws.
Social Accountability System SA8000	United States	• Based on the ILO framework, developed by the nonprofit U.S.-based organization Social Accountability International • Useful international compliance tool for companies searching the recognition of their efforts in social accountability • Standards address a number of "employer of choice" issues, including human rights, child labor and labor rights, auditing techniques, social responsibility reporting of companies, and management of large supply chains.

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Appendix D (continued)

Standard/Membership	Country Origin	Implications for EOC
AccountAbility 1000 (AA1000)	United Kingdom	• Framework designed to improve accountability and performance by learning through stakeholder engagement • Addresses the need for organizations to integrate their stakeholder engagement processes into daily activities • Framework helps users to establish a systematic stakeholder engagement process that generates the indicators, targets, and reporting systems needed to ensure its effectiveness in overall organizational performance • Building blocks of the process framework are planning, accounting, auditing, and reporting, designed to complement the Global Reporting Initiative (GRI) guidelines
GRI "Sustainability Reporting Guidelines"	Global	• Solid indicators for business reporting against corporate social responsibility. GRI is a multiguidelines area for voluntary use by organizations for reporting on the economic, environmental, and social dimensions of their activities, products, and services. • Offers a mechanism through which an unlimited number of organizations can identify themselves as committed to the GRI mission • United Nations Environment Program endorses the GRI guidelines
Dow Jones Sustainability Indexes	United States	• First global indexes tracking the financial performance of the leading sustainability-driven companies worldwide • Based on the cooperation of Dow Jones Indexes, STOXX Limited, and Sustainable Asset Management (SAM) • Provide asset managers with reliable and objective benchmarks based on economic, environmental, and social criteria in order to manage sustainability portfolios.
FTSE4Good Index Series	United Kingdom	• Designed to measure the performance of companies that meet globally recognized corporate responsibility standards • Facilitate investment in listed companies • Leading index of choice for the creation of socially responsible investment products

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