The Future of HRD in a Post-Pandemic World: Insights from Dr Wilson Wong

Mark Loon

10.1 Introduction

Dr Wilson Wong is Head of Insight and Futures at the Chartered Institute for Personnel and Development (CIPD) and Independent Chair of the Human Capital Standards Committee (HCS/1) and Deputy Chair of the Knowledge Management Standards Committee (KMS/1) at the British Standards Institution (BSI). Wilson leads the Institute’s futures and foresight capability. He has been involved in futures research since 2000. His most recent publication with the Malaysian government was ‘The Future of Talent in Malaysia 2035’ and is co-editor of Human Capital Management Standards: A Complete Guide. His career has spanned academia, corporate finance and national ICT development policy. Wilson’s PhD in Economic Psychology (Behavioural Economics) was on opportunity recognition. He is on the Board of the International Journal of Human Resource Development: Practice, Policy and Research (sponsored by the World
Federation of People Management Association, European Associations of People Management and University Forum for Human Resource Development), Editorial Board of Human Resource Development Quarterly journal (HRDQ) and Advisory Boards at Nottingham Business School (NBS) and the Work and Equality Institute. He is Visiting Professor at NBS and Visiting Faculty at Hong Kong Baptist University (HKBU). A member of the International Association of Applied Psychology and an Academic Fellow of the CIPD, he was called to the English Bar in 1990. Prior to his role at the CIPD, he worked in technology policy and financial/investment research. Given his in-depth experience and expertise in futures research that has taken him around the world, we sought Wilson's critical perspectives on the future of human resource development (HRD). The views in this interview are entirely his own. Dr Wilson Wong was interviewed by Dr Mark Loon.

10.2 Interview Transcript

10.2.1 The Pandemic

Mark: Dr Wong, thank you very much for giving us your time to share with us your experience and insights to what may be in store for us in general and what you see as the future for human resource development. But let's start with the big trends, things that you think that we need to pay attention to and then ultimately, how that impacts HR and HRD.

Wilson: Let us start with what's uppermost in everybody's mind which is this pandemic. Pandemics or epidemics have been part of the scenarios in Futures work at least from the '90s. These are understood to be inevitable events, of uncertain time frame but when it happens will have a huge impact on human communities. Futures work recognised the effects of globalization and a confluence of other factors that could exacerbate these event, and that the risks were significantly high. However, with exceptions, corporate leaders and
politicians regard these kinds of scenarios as dystopian or pessimistic and rarely did they consider these risks in their thinking. By far, they are more interested in things like business cycles and the consequence of conflict, something more tangible, more familiar and within their range of recognisable concerns.

The UK had pandemics very high on their national risk register but did not stress test their response plan and system readiness. Both George W Bush and Obama (following Ebola) signalled the need for global preparedness for this inevitability. The White House global health security unit was disbanded in 2018 because of cost savings. I believe that this pandemic will provide a shock to these leaders and all that they take for granted. Just like in the financial crisis, just like 9/11, this will be a moment in history that upends comfortable assumptions of what is normal, at least for a little while.

As you can see, even from the financial crisis of 2008/209, that there are many who will try to return to business as usual, as before. These groups won’t want additional costs, additional regulation, and additional taxation to deal with preparedness for some future ‘unprecedented’ crises. Just like we have found actions following the financial crisis or climate change commitments to be half-hearted, and often disputed. I guess temporal myopia is hard-wired—you think that bad things won’t happen during one’s time as the incumbent.

On the other hand, remember before all of this, we had Extinction Rebellion (XR). Now nearly two years old, XR brought to the fore the term ‘Climate Emergency’, harnessing broad dissatisfaction with and mistrust of existing governance structures and certainly, with the political leadership. This is happening not just in Europe but globally. In developed countries, fewer than half the citizens trust their government.
10.2.2 Is the Tide Turning?

**Wilson:** As I discuss in my chapter on futures in Human Capital Management Standards, social media and ICT have facilitated a networked society with a flowering of seemingly contradictory trends and voices. The celebration of liberal democracy can marginalise the very institutions and ideologies that underpin the functioning of that democracy. This can result in fractured and polarised identities. Too many politicians, instead of knitting the frayed strands of disparate groups or tribes to build unity and common cause, are fanning the fires of identity politics. While some people can be fooled all the time, there are many, many people who are reacting to that manipulation and are coalescing around some major themes like the Climate Emergency or Black Lives Matter. The thing is many would even reject the term ‘sustainability’ as corporate whitewash. They have an urgent mission to accelerate decarbonisation, restore the planet’s ecology and ensure racial and intergenerational justice within the next ten years, or face severe social and economic consequences. This kind of narrative, given the uncontrolled fires in Australia, the melting polar caps, widening social inequalities and so on, the evidence is, for them, far too clear that trust in political and corporate leaders to take the long view has been broken. They have also witnessed in January 2020 in Davos, the reception that Thunberg received compared to the reception that Trump. Trump received a much warmer reception than Greta Thunberg. The reports from a number of journalists there was that when you walk the corridors of Davos, people are far more sympathetic to Donald Trump than they are to Greta Thunberg.

**Mark:** That is quite a surprise.

**Wilson:** Yes, because I believe many feel that Greta Thunberg threatens the very structures on which their power and success
rest whilst they see Donald Trump, even if they dislike him intensely, as someone holding back these forces that are destabilizing the very structures that have made them rich and powerful. The pandemic too has laid open the gross inequities within very wealthy nations, tax havens, and shines a light on people like those in Davos, people who have the power to shape the future of billions. They are not just politicians, but opinion/thought leaders, scientists and lobbyists. These are a group who share a view that change is best managed in a ‘civilized’ way, in a structured process with a slow and steady bureaucracy, a particular ‘group-think’. These are the masters of the universe, but they are masters of a particular universe which XR supporters reject. But where does that leave us? All of us are colluding with the status quo. We collude because we depend on them for jobs, we depend on them for economic leadership.

Our future financial security is locked up in pension funds and flows of capital, things integral to the stability of this status quo and a particular worldview.

We are all supporting this edifice. If we agree with XR and deconstruct that structure, we endanger our financial security because you cannot cash out. While we may be sympathetic of the XR vision of a more equitable, more sustainable future, what then of our pension funds which are heavily invested in the carbon industry? How many of us can realistically cash out, and live in splendid isolation by decoupling from the financial system without considerable personal sacrifice?

We’ve discussed drivers shaping agenda and the identity politics around the kind of futures for humanity, but then there are other camps which are also trying to challenge the existing world order.

You have the fundamentalist religious groups which have been doing this and 9/11 was probably the most spectacular manifestation of that. At that time, there were already sce-
narios about the probability of a major terrorist attack on American soil. After the two Gulf wars, it was a question of having the intelligence to stop it materializing and it was only a matter of missing one plot. There is no intelligence body that can prevent 100% of all attempts for all time. What scenarios could not anticipate was the nature of that attack—using civilian airliners as missiles. What many expected was the traditional stuff—hijacking an oil tanker, that kind of thing. One of the things that they thought quite likely was dirty bombs, exploding dirty nuclear devices in big metropolitan areas. I suspect that the dirty bomb was probably easier to execute, but it would not have made such a spectacular statement.

10.2.3 The Future of Work: Is It All About Technology?

Mark: It was about the audacity and making a real statement.
Wilson: It was audacious. And at another level, it demonstrated that their ideology was somehow creative and resourceful. Those events have changed our lives forever. The billions spent on airport security, surveillance and other technologies only happened because of 9/11. After this pandemic, risk management consultants will be well sought-after because they have been talking about this for years. But I think after the pandemic, technology will be less glitzy but more ubiquitous. Let us put it that until now, the discourse on the future work has been overwhelmingly driven by tech, tech, and more glamorous tech. And yet, when it came to this pandemic, it was back to basics, distancing, washing of hands and protecting our face from being infected by a minuscule virus. Technology couldn’t stop it or enable us to carry on with life normally. Of course, the proffered tech solution to the virus is this silver bullet vaccine, but ultimately no technology provided
the security to human populations to live as they did a few
months ago, \textit{sans} lockdown, \textit{sans} isolation.
The future of work will be driven by many things, not least
human agency, and technologies is only but one driver. The
shift, the almost unstoppable gradual evolution of the
employment relationship from employment contracts to
looser, gig jobs is facilitated by the romance of platform
technology. While useful, these platforms need to sell you
the dream of flexible working, that you are in control. It
brings a quality of life and you even get to meet cool people.
Never mind about the minimum/uncertain wages, long
hours and the oftentimes exploitation. All these characteris-
tics are not accidental.
These technologies are part and parcel of an industrial com-
plex to make these platforms normative. As a member, you
are told you are part of large, global community. These plat-
forms started out ostensibly matching need to ‘spare’
resource but, they’re not. The platforms for human gig
workers are very community-based, very identity-based,
very values-based. As an individual, your agency is limited.
You’re in no position to alter the narrative of empowered
selves—the fact that there’s so many thousands of people
participating in the gig economy, they cannot all be wrong,
right? They cannot all have chosen this life if it is so bad.

10.2.4 What Has the Current Crisis Revealed?

\textbf{Wilson}: There is a certain necessity to it [the gig economy] because
some people cannot get other entry-level jobs, but also for
some segments, there is freedom. The trade-off is security. In
the last ten years of quantitative easing, there’s a lot of capital
chasing investments. When you have economies flush with
capital, investors are hunting for returns. You find that effi-
ciency is then not always so important as activity.
The economies that had been lifted by quantitative easing with this ocean of extra synthetic money means that we have close to full employment. There is always something for someone to do because you’re investing in this, investing in that, just to get activity, to get a return. That generates jobs. Most of the jobs are poor, entry-level jobs but that doesn’t matter much to investors. People are occupied and it’s mostly only in Europe that we have this conversation about living wage and it’s only in the last few years that it’s become a real thing, but by and large for a long time, the metric was how many unemployed people do you have? That metric in the last eight years has been very healthy.

That has a lot to do with quantitative easing, a lot pump-priming. With the cost of capital so low, the cost of failure is also lower, many can try all kinds of things, generating activity. The pandemic has seen a massive injection of financial support from government and that raises the question, ‘Is this going to be the new normal? Are we all going to enter a cycle of higher taxes?’ What the pandemic has exposed is the vulnerability of that celebrated flexible workforce, one encouraged by policy. Now, this flexible workforce has created a political conundrum because this group has no reserves, they have no resilience for this or any kind of shock. Even full-time employees are at risk.

And now we have a major crisis that puts our economy in an induced coma. The middle classes are very risk-averse and dislike jolts, but with the billions injected by the State, most can pull through. For the gig workers, everything is a jolt. If you jolt them to a point where they go, ‘This society doesn’t support me. I don’t feel that I belong here. What have I got to lose?’ Structural inequalities in a crisis is very dangerous, in terms of social cohesion and continued governance.

We do not have resilience. The more developed your economy, the more you go for efficiency in established products and services. The more you go for efficiency, the more you go for just in time. The more you go for just in time and long,
long supply chains, the more fragile your systems. Just watching governments scrambling for face masks, for medicines during this crisis when logistics and manufacturing are severely curtailed is a lesson in the price of globalised efficiencies. All it takes is one missing component and the whole plant grinds to a halt. But nativism and pulling up the drawbridge is also not the answer. Ironically, the solution to the excesses of globalisation is more international cooperation for those wicked problems.

While I’m not hopeful that majority of our political and corporate leaders will be wise and see the crisis as an opportunity to rethink their raison d’être, I can see that the citizenry have responded to the effects of the pandemic with kindness, generosity, fortitude and solidarity with their fellow suffering humans.

For now, I believe, the pendulum is swinging to nationalism with all the elements of xenophobia and protectionism. Greater localism, resilience and self-sufficiency. Curtailing the movement of people, goods and capital in the name of national security. At a national level, the concentration of say milk production in a small number of large firms is efficient but not very resilient since you concentrate the points of failure. The same with global manufacturing when concentrated in the world’s factory, China. But the response is not to pull up the drawbridges but to encourage diversity in the system. You can have some larger firms but also nurture the little local networks to meet the needs in the local regional economies as well, which means foregoing the nth degree of efficiency.

10.2.5 Implication on Human Resources Management and Development

Mark: I read some articles about entrepreneurship in India, and how they are so resourceful, doing so much with so little and many a times with basic resources. I recall reading how India’s dhobi work. Most of them are off grid. I think if we faced a crisis
with involving power, countries like India would probably fare better than many because they are less reliant on modern necessities. Like you said, with local and shorter supply chains and they’re used to it.

**Wilson:** Imagine where we are now. During this lockdown, if I have reliable Wi-Fi, clean water, electricity, I’m fine, I can continue to earn a living and survive comfortably. But every single one of these things is a vulnerability. If your electricity goes down, water stops, broadband cut, you cannot work, wash your clothes in the washing machine, or cook. With no power, millions of pounds of food frozen food will go to waste. If these are not collected in time, you’ll have the stench, and we will have rats to contend with. We are dependent on distant fragile systems which, in a developed country, we take for granted. And then there are the millions where the pandemic has indeed denied them of even the very basics for survival. This is what the pandemic has highlighted in large letters.

**Mark:** It’s an extraordinary world we are living in. How do you see how HRM or HRD being affected?

**Wilson:** I think first, we must recognise that this is a moment in history that people will remember for generations, not always in the same way admittedly, but one that will shift what’s normal. Just like after the Second World War, with the sacrifices made by every man, woman and child, we built the National Health Service and the modern welfare state, so to this crisis is likely to bring about shifts in the social contract—what is valued work and fair reward, for example, with health and care professionals.

For leaders in organisations and especially for those in HRM, remember that it is in a crisis that others see who you really are and what you are made of. You’re having to make a lot of first-time decisions and you will make mistakes as the situation evolves. HRM will have to make tough choices for the business as revenues collapse and government support evaporates. More important than ever, you need to follow through on the organization’s core values.
Keep your decision processes transparent and where possible work out loud the dilemmas as a way of bringing your workforce with you. Many will be afraid for their financial security knowing that salaries may have to cut, and jobs lost, but treat your workers with respect, show a clear objectivity in your survival plan and the factors you’re considering in your recovery planning. Make sure that the principles apply evenly to all. People remember how they are treated and if you cling to your core values, you hope for those positive stories that will be part of your organization’s mythology for a long, long time. Not just delivering on tasks at this time but also making your organisation’s values central to every decision and action.

Second, with much of your workforce working remotely, HR will have to build, rapidly, a rich multi-channel communications and socialisation capability. We spoke earlier about identity politics and societal tribes and interest groups. Well, organisations are not immune, and you’ll have a variety of ideologies and beliefs in your workforce—that’s part of having a diverse workforce. But when faced with a workforce in lockdown, the clarity of the leadership voice and vision, the active listening by management, the assurance of support all matter to create a semblance of normality so that people can get on with their work and serve their stakeholders. Remember, listen and support and do not judge or assume how well others are coping by how you are doing. A sudden shift to working at home can bring unknown hardships. We don’t know what those conditions are like for each worker. What may provide assurance at an unsettling time could involve a weekly message from the CEO, more frequent one-to-ones by line managers, support by HRM for those teaming conversations and repeated webinars on the smart use of online communications and collaboration tools. There are lots of open resources for organisations on the CIPD website for those navigating this crisis and for people risks, I recommend that you look at
ISO22330—Guidelines for people aspects of business continuity. For the duration of the crisis, the British Standards Institution has enabled free downloads of this and other critical standards to guide organisations.

Third, once you’ve crossed-over the initial crisis response, it’s time to revisit your risk management and business continuity plans. Many organisations will have documents that now look inadequate, or naive. Assumptions made about risk diversification by having subsidiaries across different markets or in different product markets will all be challenged by the global nature of a pandemic and the curtailment of logistics and cross-border movement. Suddenly, all those things that the business relied upon for resilience cannot be activated and contingency resources cannot be reached. Part of this is just the nature and scope of traditional planning—it’s org-centric. Such plans assume the continued functioning of a lot of external systems—transport, logistics, healthcare systems, order and security. While it seems like an indulgence, organisations who stress test their strategy and operational resilience with scenarios and then develop and properly rehearse their contingency plans will be far more prepared for crises.

Scenario Planning is a Futures technique used to build organisational and national resilience. But as with all planning, if you don’t rehearse this with the relevant stakeholders and impress on all the importance of prioritizing particular risks, you’re likely to make poorer, on-the-hoof decisions when in the thick of a crisis. These investments in strategic, longer-term thinking, better decision-making processes and the capability to operationalize contingency plans at speed go hand-in-hand with horizon scanning and critical sense-making by the leadership. The other challenge for HR is understanding what success looks like in a post-pandemic economy. In the last 10 years or so, because we’ve had full employment on the back of quantitative easing,
that is, lots and lots of capital sloshing about, you find that a many companies have differentiated themselves by looking seriously at stakeholder interests, not just shareholder ones. They talk about them being corporate citizens, sustainability/diversity champions with ambitious ESG (environmental, social, and governance) targets. According to a survey by the Boston Consulting Group, more than 90 percent of investors would prioritize key business capabilities over ESG objectives. While understandable, this is a classic example of short-termism and anti-systems thinking. I believe that your stakeholders will see if you are values-driven or merely expedient in your recovery actions. Just look at the strong negative reaction to Richard Branson’s appeal for a government bail-out of Virgin Atlantic from the safety of Necker Island. At an operational level, the ability to adjust your goods and services to meet your customers’ or users’ needs in a timely way is possibly the first metric of success. By supporting your customers and suppliers in a principled manner you’re bringing them with you, crucial when we hit the even rougher waters of 2021.

Mark: Where do you see people development heading towards? There has been a significant shift towards self-directed learning, and self-reliance in shaping one’s own career. Will this intensify?

Wilson: There has been a huge uptick in this area as everyone is learning to use online meeting and collaboration technologies. Not only that, but the etiquette of leading webinars, chairing virtual meetings, building teams and supporting the physical and psychological well-being of dispersed workers. Furloughed staff are also taking the time to learn either formally through e-learning portals, or through volunteering/working with other organisations. One area where HRD can probably make a big difference is in intensifying leadership development. In this pandemic, we can see an emerging correlation between leadership types, their resultant choices and stark fatality rates
in the first wave. We also spoke earlier about identity politics and how within the workspace there are a diversity of ideologies and beliefs.

The authority and credibility of the leadership to mobilize and influence their dispersed workforce requires a consistent and visible application of the organisation’s espoused values when sensitively addressing the needs and expectations of their staff, and their families. A compelling shared vision by the leadership coupled with an open, enquiring mind and a willingness to be open and vulnerable in your thinking behind dilemmas are likely to mean more forbearance and engagement from your workforce. One example of HRD is where organisations build adaptive spaces or ‘sandboxes’, which is a place where ideas and concerns are aired in a safe space, all done without judgment or reprisals, and instead used to build camaraderie and experimental solutions. The opportunities of a crisis to learn about ourselves and to take a few chances to stretch shouldn’t be missed. We are all learning and drawing on knowledge from different disciplines, grappling with complexity and huge unknowns—it is a perfect time to flex those strategic muscles. In the end, this pandemic is a crisis that endangered human capital, and the economic cost is partly a reflection of the value people bring to the economy. I hope that this lesson is not lost in the rush to resume operations.

Mark: That’s a very good point. That’s great Wilson. Thank you very much.

10.3 Conclusion

The interview with Wilson provided some invaluable insight and foresight into how global trends have and may coalesce with another. We know the external environment is dynamic but recent events with Covid-19 and racial tensions sparked by the killing of George Floyd have only shown how quickly events are amplified and accelerate at great speed
in having significant impact on all aspects of society, the economy and HRD across the world. Based on his research and conversations with key actors around the globe, Wilson argues that many nation states’ response to Covid-19 is largely myopic leading reprioritisation of other matters ahead of public health. While some may say that Covid-19 is ‘unprecedented’, and it is difficult to argue otherwise, genuine black swans (a metaphor that describes an event that comes as a surprise) are truly rare as there are usually tell-tale signs.

In the interview, Wilson argues that while there are many proponents of change (e.g. climate emergency), the hegemony of incumbents is not easily disrupted. Thunberg may be very popular and supported by many, but does she have the backing of those who can make the swift changes that is needed? Transformational change is needed if equality, justice and environmental conservation is to be achieved. Wilson cautions that while Machiavellian politicking in the background and Sun Tzu-like subtle tactics will, of course, always be present, brazen confrontations will only continue to grow.

The impact of events the last few years such as the 9/11 attacks and Covid-19 will leave lasting imprints on society and economies, in particular how we think about our health and safety, and how businesses need to adapt. Technology plays, and will continue to play, an integral if not taken-for-granted role in our lives. However, it is not the be-all and end-all. The way technology impacts us will vary between people, sectors and economies. Those that realise and have the prescience to appreciate and exploit the nuances are likely to forge new pathways to innovate. Covid-19 has been catalytic in compelling organisations to rethink their business and operating models.

What does all this mean for human resource development and management? The argument that organisations need to be flexible is of course still pivotal, but what Covid-19 has shown us is what true effective leadership should be (and unfortunately it has also shown us what it should not be as well) and how leadership is so very important to the lives and livelihoods of people. Leadership development especially capabilities that enable individuals to deal with ambiguity, make fast but effectual
decisions, and be reflective and reflexive in real time, are crucial. Organisations will also have to start dealing with even more diversity, not just where people are concerned but also in its modes of operations for different groups of staff and how they are managed. Finally, scenario planning and business continuity will no longer be a luxury and will become a staple agenda item. HRD will need to support all of this.