



Les Compagnons du Devoir: a French Compagnonnage as a HRD system

Les Compagnons
du Devoir

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Hedley Malloch, Birgit Kleymann and Jacques Angot
IESEG School Of Management, Catholic University of Lille, Lille, France, and
Tom Redman
Durham University Business School, University of Durham, Durham, UK

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Abstract

Purpose – To describe and analyse the *Compagnons du Devoir* (CdD), a French *Compagnonnage*; that is, a labour brotherhood and a community of practice; and to identify the reasons for its success as a human resource development system (HRD).

Design/methodology/approach – A one-off case study of the CdD using data gathered by the authors in their capacity as members of a *Conseil Scientifique* evaluating a project to internationalise the CdD's approach to vocational education and training (VET). Primary sources include the UK apprentices who passed through the system, and employees of the *Compagnons du Devoir*.

Findings – Much of the success of the CdD rests on its capacity to develop knowledge, skills, and *savoir-être* in young people through the volume of off-the-job training; near-peer and peer mentoring, the systematic use of older and retired workers and the management of movement and change through a network of residential colleges.

Research limitations/implications – The research design is a single case study, whose primary data is cross-sectional, and based largely on data gathered from UK rather than French apprentices. Policy implications include the importance of a training rich in culture and humanity for the training of young people.

Practical implications – These include the positive role of older workers in VET; the importance of off-the-job training and mentoring; and the centrality of geographic flexibility in knowledge creation.

Originality/value – The paper is a case study of a French *Compagnonnage* from a managerial/HR perspective rather than those of labour history or sociology. It describes and analyses the functioning of the CdD using the idea of the honour principle. The CdD's approach to HRD can be usefully contrasted with that offered by other national systems.

Keywords Human resource development, Peer mentoring, Older workers, France

Paper type Case study

Introduction

This article is a case study of Les Compagnons du Devoir (CdD), the largest and best-known example of the three surviving French *Compagnonnages*. There are many reasons why HR students should find it of interest. First, the *Compagnonnages* are probably the oldest extant worker organizations in Europe with a traceable history dating back at least to the fifteenth century. They are one of the few French institutions which survive from the *Ancien Régime*. Their longevity suggests that they have mastered critical strategic tests of durability and sustainability, a feat all the more remarkable when account is taken of the fact that they have been illegal for much of their existence. Second, the CdD is probably the largest private provider of high-skill vocational education



training (VET) in Europe. Third, the *Compagnonnages* and the Freemasons are the only two remaining initiation based institutions currently to be found in Europe. Fourth, it is a study of a brotherhood as a labour organization; thus it stands apart from more common forms, such as trades unions, worker co-operatives and professional associations.

Yet there is another reason why the French *Compagnonnages* are of importance. They are pre-modern organizations with medieval roots, but in our opinion they have some lessons to offer us. Gurjewitsch described medieval society as a cooperative system which “knitted individuals into tight ‘micro-worlds’ that offered help and protection when required and in themselves formed the cornerstone from which the idea of mutual assistance and exchange of services was built up” (Gurjewitsch, 1980, p. 221). The CdD still retains much of this community spirit and this is reflected in its day-to-day operation as a training agency. As such it can be contrasted with its more modern counterparts organized along more employer-led, market-orientated lines, of the sort which are common in other countries.

The case study considers the CdD as a human resource development (HRD) system; that is the main HR function of CdD today. Historically it had some influence on the development of French industrial relations, but that has now withered away. It can be evaluated as a system suitable for adoption by other advanced economies wishing to offer their youngsters high-skill VET. Alternatively it can be considered as a collection of HRD best practices, to be unbundled and for selective choices to be made amongst their many HRD policies.

The paper takes as its starting point Swanson’s (2001) definition of HRD. It then describes the research method adopted for the case study. This is followed by an account of the history of the CdD and its structure. The case then highlights some of the reasons for the sustained success of the CdD as an HRD system. These are:

- the volume of off-the-job learning;
- the use of peer and near-peer mentoring;
- the use of working and retired *Compagnons*[1] in the training of younger members; and
- the importance of spatial movement and change in learning.

The paper then draws out some important points about the processes, ownership and content of a successful HRD organization as evidenced in this case study. These can be used to suggest modifications to Swanson’s model of HRD. Finally, while the case presents a French approach to HRD, we make no claims that it is typical of the HRD practices in that country. That said, an institution like the *Compagnonnage* could exist nowhere else. It is no accident that three *Compagnonnages* exist in France whilst they have died out everywhere else. There are cultural elements in the French soil that have sustained them there.

A definition of HRD

We take as a starting point Swanson’s definition of HRD which sees it as a process of developing and/or unleashing human expertise through personnel training and development for the purpose of improving performance, a term which embraces organization and work processes at group and individual levels. Training and development is seen as a systematic process for developing expertise in individuals.

The three critical application areas are: human resource management, career development and quality management. Swanson sees psychology, economics and systems theory as the core theories of HRD (Swanson, 2001, p. 304).

Three further points of clarification are required. First, Swanson does not identify the precise nature of the relationship between the individuals and groups who are the object the HRD effort, and “the organization” but presumably it is for the most part one of employment, though it could include voluntary work. The HRD effort takes place in the employing organization or is contracted out by that organization to a third party. Second, HRD involves a group Swanson labels “HRD professionals” (Swanson, 2001, pp. 304-5). Swanson does not identify the membership of this group, yet the use of the word “professional” implies some of sort of manager or technocrat employed by the organization.

Third, while Swanson sees HRD as a process of developing “expertise” he never defines this term. For purposes of this paper we assume that expertise has three dimensions: knowledge, skills and competency. By “knowledge” we mean an understanding of the cognitive aspects of successful job performance as expressed by underpinning scientific, technical and professional disciplines; and relevant firm practices and industry specific procedures often expressed as organizational routines (Nelson and Winter, 1982). The French word for this dimension of expertise is *savoir* – to know. “Skills” are defined as the functional competences, the abilities to plan and execute a project, the ability to do things, demonstrated expertise with the technologies of production, or what is known in French as *savoir-faire* – to know how. “Competency” is defined here as the social skills and behaviours necessary to be a fully functioning member of a community at the level of the work group, organization and society at large; these embrace important dimensions of citizenship. The French expression is *savoir-être* – to how to be, to know how to become. The three dimensions of expertise can be represented diagrammatically as shown in Figure 1.

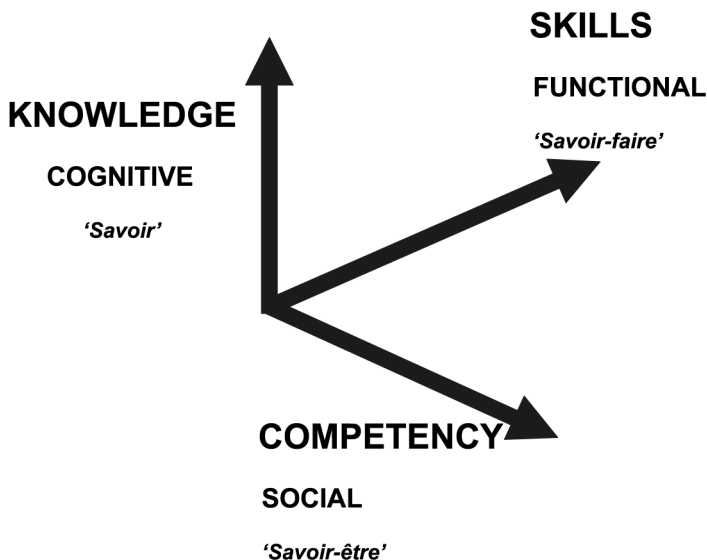


Figure 1.
The three dimensions of
expertise

National systems of HRD vary in the weight they attach to each of the three axes of expertise. In the UK the emphasis is on functional expertise, the ability to demonstrate the task-related skills required at the point of production. This reflects a long-standing UK HRD with the idea of “the practical man”, the idea mainly held by employers that VET has little place for education which, in our terms, is competency related. This tradition of functional expertise is so strong in the UK that it has been officially enshrined in the systems of government endorsed national occupational competence standards (Delamare Le Diest and Winterton, 2005, pp. 34-35). This pre-occupation with the functional skills required by “the practical man” occurs at the expense of underpinning knowledge, especially in comparison to that found in the training of younger workers in other European countries (Smithers, 1993; Green, 1995; Steedman, 1988; Steedman and Hawkins, 1994; Keep, 1999).

In the USA, in the management literature at least, there is a concern dating back nearly 50 years about competency as defined as those personality characteristics associated with superior performance and high motivation (White, 1959). However it is a competency, which is quite narrowly defined, bounded by the workplace and directly tied to improving firm performance. Notions of competency based on citizenship, acculturation and membership of society at large are absent.

With respect to blue-collar work, the US position is even more restricted. The influential Secretary’s Commission of Achieving Necessary Skills Report (Kane *et al.*, 1990) indicated six sets of what the report terms “functional skills” necessary to be imparted to the US blue-collar worker, two of which could be construed as “competency” in the *savoir-être* sense of the term. The first is social interaction which, like White’s (1959) managerial competence, is focused on behaviour in small groups in the workplace, and at the customer interface; both types of behaviour are tied to effective work performance. This concept of competency receives some attention in the Report and is developed in some detail, though not as much as the other “harder” functional skills, e.g. resource management and MIS. The sixth of the “functional skills” is affective skills. With its references to personal attitudes, integrity, motivation and values it hints at a competency wider than the workplace and connected to a role larger than that of an employee. What is significant about this “functional skill” is that it is mentioned once in the report (Kane *et al.*, 1990, p. 12) – and then dropped from the discussion.

Therefore the *savoir-être* dimension of HRD is relatively weak in both the UK and USA. This is a major omission. Coleman and Keep (2001) note that the links between VET and citizenship and life outside work are weak in the UK, despite the facts that it:

- is precisely this dimension which holds the key to re-engagement of educationally marginalised adults in life-long learning (Keep, 2000);
- can substantially contribute to the creation of high-skill polyvalent workers (Brown and Keep, 1999); and
- can build links between VET and academic education (Green, 1998).

On the other hand a notion of competency which embraces citizenship, acculturation, a moral involvement with work, independence, critical abilities, humanity, the ability to develop personally, to change, personal self-development, as well as the skills, drive and outlook to work in the world at large are well developed in many parts of mainland Europe (Delamare Le Diest and Winterton, 2005, pp. 36-38). This conception of

competence is most commonly associated with Germany and the idea of *beruf*, Les Compagnons du Devoir (a calling or a vocation) though as this case study shows it can also be found in France.

Methodology

The four authors were members of the Conseil Scientifique de l'International Journeyman Programme. The International Journeyman Programme (IJP) was a project set up to offer high-skills training in construction and engineering to young people from the north of England by passing them through the CdD training system. The origins and early history of the Programme are reported elsewhere (Malloch and Redman, 2005). In brief, it consisted of a recruitment and selection procedure in the UK; induction training followed by a three-week sample of life in a *Maison*[2] and work in a French engineering factory. At the end of this trial period the CdD offered some youngsters employment in France and training.

The Conseil Scientifique advised the IJP Steering Group on present and future policies. In this capacity the authors had unrestricted access to the main participants in the UK and in France, including managers and trainers in factories in France, and the UK apprentices passing through the system. This paper draws on evidence obtained in interviews with six youngsters who were offered full time permanent employment as apprentices in France and who lived and worked in the CdD for at least six months. This is a small number but it represents all of the UK apprentices selected for work in France; each was interviewed at least once. The interviews were semi-structured and focused on the apprentices' life in the *Compagnonnage*. They were recorded; the tapes were transcribed and then coded for items and themes of interest. The UK apprentices were aged 18-20 and their academic achievements were modest. Two came straight from full-time study, the other four had worked either as apprentices or on some other type of training scheme in engineering, and two had worked for Japanese firms.

Nominal Group Technique (Delbecq and Van de Ven, 1971) was used with three cohorts of UK youngsters who completed all or part of the initial three-week programme of life in the House whilst working in French factories. The size of these groups varied between 8-12. These sessions were recorded, transcribed and analysed for relevant points

We also interviewed managers and trainers employed by the CdD; and non-*Compagnons* who employed and trained them in their factories. Site visits were made to *Maisons* in Lille, Toulouse, Dijon, Lyon, Paris and Epône. We obtained much valuable information on the structure and functioning of the CdD in our work with the Conseil Scientifique and the interaction this allowed with senior managers and others in the CdD.

Les Compagnons du Devoir

When we asked a UK *Apprenti*[3] to describe the CdD he said:

You can't really describe what the *Compagnons* are about to people who don't know about them. The impression even here in France is the *Compagnons* are some kind of sect – like you get branded when you enter . . . it's a place where you learn a trade; that's at its lowest level. But you can't really explain what it is; it's like a school in one aspect; but it's also like a family. It's lots of different things. There is no one way to describe the *Compagnons*. It will probably be the biggest experience of your life. If you join the *Compagnons* it will probably be

something which will stay with you the rest of your life even if you only do a year or two and finish at that. (Darren, UK *Apprenti*, Dijon House).

The CdD is best described as a brotherhood. Etymologically, *Compagnon* is derived from “*copain*” or someone with whom one shares bread. The initiation rituals which form such an important part of the spiritual life of the *Compagnonnage* make “unrelated men into fictive kin, specifically brothers” (Truant, 1994, p. 13). Today the CdD offers high-skill VET in 23 trades in engineering, construction, baking and confectionery. This apparently haphazard collection of crafts is, in fact, the outcome of its philosophy of transformer (change); and of *main d’oeuvre* (working with the hands). Office and production line work have no place in the *Compagnonnage* (Hautin and Billier, 2000, pp.51-56). Taken together transformer and *main d’oeuvre* focus the CdD’s range of crafts on those engaged on changing natural material through skilled handwork. It also symbolises another part of the CdD philosophy expressed by the reflexive form of the verb transformer: *se transformer* – the ability to change and develop oneself. Thus man, material, tools, the acquisition of skill, and personal development are all linked for the *Compagnon*: these apparently disparate elements coalesce to place change at the heart of the *Compagnonnage* which can be considered an identity transforming organization (Greil and Rudy, 1984) offering a personal development high in skills, rich in knowledge and profound in its humanity.

Their early history is unclear; the word *Compagnon* was first used in 1420, but they emerged as a force in the seventeenth century from amongst the work organizations of the Ancien Régime, such as the guilds, religious orders, and the confraternities. The *Compagnonnages* borrowed from them all, combining their features into a rich blend of religious symbolism, rituals, ideas of honour, language, fraternity, hierarchy, definitions of skill, and division of labour (Truant, 1994, pp. 48-72). The *Compagnon* was a craftsman who worked outside of the guilds. They were well represented in the building trades. Linked to the need for workers to travel from site to site across Europe, to pass on codified knowledge, and to find shelter and support at every new site, the *Compagnonnages* developed their own traditions, rites of initiation and passage, and secret signs that ensured mutual recognition. A network of *Maisons* was set up throughout France to accommodate their members. Although they had features in common with contemporary work organizations, they differed in one crucial respect: they refused to admit employers. The *Compagnonnages* defended worker interests against rapacious employers, provided training schools, managed the network of Houses, directed apprentices through the Tour of France necessary to complete their professional training, and supported needy members.

The medieval origins of the CdD can still be seen it today. Its history, and what Kieser calls the “the extraordinary cooperative spirit of the Middle Ages” (Kieser, 1989, p. 550) live on in the ritual meals, mutual help, dress codes, the secret initiation rituals which accompany admission and promotion, and the taking of a new name to endow a new identity on entry to the CdD. These rituals, taken together with the symbols and myths of the CdD today help elicit a moral involvement from its members which is consonant with the normative nature (Etzioni, 1961) of the CdD’s objectives: *le métier*, *le devoir* and *transmettre le métier*.

The CdD is owned and managed by its members. There is little written about them in English with the exception of the anthropological works of the Herzogs (Herzog, 2001; Herzog and Herzog, 1999b; Herzog and Herzog, 1998), but few of these are readily

accessible and they are not addressed to a HR audience. One of the great strengths of the Herzogs' work is that they bring an anthropological eye to bear on the *Compagnons*. Modern accounts of the CdD (Icher, 1999; Icher, 1994) tend to be written from an historic rather than an organization or managerial perspective.

The structure of the CdD

Membership

The CdD has five types of member: These are: *Apprenti*, *Aspirant*, *Compagnon*, *Ancien* and *Sédentaire*. *Apprentis* enter at age of 15 or 16; a few enter later. *Apprentis* complete a training which lasts up to three years. On successful completion of their training they can become an *Aspirant*, and undertake the Tour de France; this is a period of work, study and training in different parts of France or other countries. *Aspirants* graduate to full *Compagnon* status after which they may serve the CdD for a further three years. *Anciens* are *Compagnons* who are working, but have left the House to live with their families. *Sédentaires* are retired *Compagnons* living outside the House. *Anciens* and *Sédentaires* play key roles in the assessment of *savoir-faire* and *savoir-être*. Progression to a higher grade of membership depends upon certification of *savoir-faire* and *savoir-être* through assessments controlled by the CdD.

The House

The House is a place of residence and training in towns throughout France. *Apprentis* and *Aspirants* stay here working for local employers, or following courses. By night *Apprentis* and *Aspirants* sleep and eat together at the House. In the evenings they study or work in the House's extensively equipped workshop and libraries. Every *Compagnon* has a responsibility to help the younger members. Young *Apprentis* share rooms with older members. The Houses vary enormously in character; some of the newer ones are undistinguished in appearance, but many of the older Houses have the look and feel of ancient universities.

Education and training

Education and training runs on an eight-week cycle comprising six weeks of work followed by two weeks' study. Houses offer theoretical training, common courses in English, History, Art, Languages, Science, French and Maths, and training in trade techniques. The *Maître de Stage*[4], a *Compagnon* who lives in or near the House, gives practical and theoretical courses. He may work in a local business by day. The young learners take appropriate public examinations of *savoir*, for example, the *Brevet d'Etudes Professionnelle*, and *Certificat d'Aptitude Professionnelle* for *Apprentis*; and *Brevet de Maîtrise*, *Brevet de Technicien Supérieur* or *Certificat Professionnel de Perfectionnement* for *Aspirants*. However, their reputation rests on their certification of their functional skills and competency by the CdD. Grade of membership is linked to certification of *savoir-faire* assessed by trade tests, and an assessment of their *savoir-être*: the CdD controls both of these. The two main trade tests are *le travail d'adoption*, which marks the transition from *Apprenti* to *Aspirant*; and *le travail de réception* successful completion of which leads to full *Compagnon* status.

It is possible to progress through the CdD system without satisfying the French State's training requirements; on the other hand all *Aspirants* and *Apprentis* wishing to become *Compagnons* must satisfy the other *Compagnons* in their House that they are

ready for promotion. Upon completion of training many *Compagnons* remain with the CdD for three or four years as *Prévôts*[5] or as a *Maître de Stage* in a House.

The philosophy of the CdD

The CdD has a strong sense of mission, which crystallises into two related concepts: *le devoir* and *le metier*. *Le devoir* is a complex, polyvalent concept that reaches to the heart of what it means to be a *Compagnon*. “*Le devoir*” means “duty”, “work” and “craft”; all three are indissolubly linked for a *Compagnon*. They define both the *Compagnonnage*, and the *Compagnons* as individuals. It gives meaning to the *Compagnons*’ roles as professionals, family men and citizens in the wider community. Icher describes it in the following terms:

Today, as yesterday, *devoir* can be conceived as a sacred value by the *Compagnons* upon whom it bestows an essential identity giving dimensions which eclipse the narrower domains of *métier* and work (Icher, 1999, p. 444).

Icher quotes Jean Bernard, the Editor of the journal of *Le Compagnonnage*, writing in 1943, a time of great crisis for the *Compagnons* when the German occupier of France threatened their very existence:

Le devoir envelops the entire *Compagnonnage* with its spirit. It is the very expression of its entirety which flows directly from the conscience of Man at work, especially manual work. It is the way in which in one must live and enact the *metier*, regardless of age or status. From this we can see that *le devoir* is a very far-reaching context which governs even the most detailed aspects of practice. Indeed *le devoir* envelops the whole life of the *Compagnon* (Icher, 1999, p. 443).

Le devoir is sometimes confused with the German idea of *beruf*, to which it has some outward resemblance, but philosophically they are distinct. Whilst *beruf* stems from a vocational calling, *le devoir* stresses duty and obligation.

Le metier is a closely related idea. Very loosely it means “craft” or “trade” and the *Compagnons* have an obligation to “transmettre le métier” – to develop, improve and diffuse the trade and the notions of humanity and culture which, in the *Compagnons* view, must be part and parcel of the practice of their work. The aims of the CdD are summarised by Icher:

... the *Compagnonnage* has always placed the craft at the centre of its concerns and values. Yet it is necessary to define that word which, for the *compagnons*, cannot and must not be confused with words like “profession”, “work”, “occupation”, ... “job” or “career”. ... We are at the heart of a *Compagnonnage* system which has as its ... aim the transmission of its heritage. For the *compagnons* the essential part of that inheritance is the heritage and culture of the craft ... always work better, teach the craft and help your fellow craftsman (Icher, 1999, pp. 440-441).

Therefore the CdD seeks to develop the whole man, including his humanity and cultural adaptability. His technical skills are only one element in a much larger collection of abilities which rest on a conception of a worker as a citizen in a community rather than as factor of production to be bought and sold in a market place. For the CdD a good worker is more than an employee with excellent technical skills; it is as much concerned with developing a good attitude, awareness and spirit. One member of the CdD explained:

The *Compagnons* is not like a firm. We do it for the idea of people growing up with us, of taking up the trade and keeping it alive . . . The first thing you have to do as a firm is to sell, to make money. We don't have to make anything. Every *Compagnon* gives a bit of himself.

It is our contention that *le devoir*, the motive force and the *raison d'être* of the CdD is a tacit and powerful expression of the honour principle, a concept best described as a sense of duty emanating from membership of a certain caste which can find expression both in the workplace and in citizenship at large. It has important consequences for definitions of "job", "career", "skill" and "motivation to work". For D'Iribane (1994) the honour principle makes itself manifest in ideals such as "lover of the craft", "skill involved", and "nobility of work" (p. 90). D'Iribane expands on this idea in his analysis of Crozier's (1963) reporting of his interviews with employees in French public sector organizations:

These words give expression to the conflict between the nobility of work done out of love of the craft or skill involved and the lack of nobility of a job done for purely utilitarian purposes. This desire "to care about the work" out of love for the skill involved rather than for the "result" required by the hierarchy is associated with "conscientiousness" and "professional pride", terms whose use by the interviewers elicits enthusiastic approval from interviewees and sometimes "a great deal of warmth and emotion" . . . This combination of group norms, desire to care about work out of love of the skill involved and professional pride matches the form of sense of duty that characterises the honour principle (D'Iribane, 1994, p. 82).

The mission of *transmettre le métier* is driven by the honour principle, an idea deeply embedded in French culture which can be traced back to the writings of Montesquieu (1748). Notions of *le devoir* and *transmettre le métier* were encountered many times during the course of our fieldwork in our meetings with *Compagnons* and non-*Compagnons* alike. For many of the UK *Apprentis* passing through the Houses and factories in France it was the most noticeable aspect of French working life. One commented:

It is different in France. They are mechanical engineers and metal-workers; that's what they want to do and that's what they are. They say "I love my job, I love getting up in the morning"; it's just like a hobby for them, they don't do it for the money. It's strange; it's weird when you first go there.

In 2003 the CdD had nearly 8,000 young people at some stage of training and professional development: these were 6,000 *Apprentis*, 1,700 *Aspirants*, and 700 *Compagnons* working as trainers, administrators and *Prévôts* in Houses, and at the Head Office in Paris. There is some evidence that the CdD training is a good preparation for future professional development. According to one survey (Icher, 1999, p.553) on completing training only about half work as tradesmen. Nearly 30 per cent move in to management and about ten per cent remain as *Prévôts* in the CdD system. Others enter professions such as architecture, engineering or teaching.

Herzog argues that the CdD *Apprentis* qualify faster and in greater proportions than their peers in mainstream programmes and that this pattern of success is replicated for *Aspirants*. He further argues that virtually all youths who successfully graduate from the CdD find jobs despite historically high levels of unemployment in France (Herzog, 2001, p. 3). For him the CdD offers a powerful system which develops human resources, who would otherwise be the rejects of the *collèges* and *lycées* into "better craftsmen, businessmen and citizens" with "well developed ideas about professional ethics and

family and civic life” accompanied “by social skills in advance of their years and often of their individual social class origins” (Herzog, 2001, p. 3). The next section discusses some of the reasons why the CdD is so successful.

Analysis of reasons for success

The volume of off-the job learning

The pattern of study and work prescribed for an *Apprenti* was two weeks of *Stage*, or full-time study in the classrooms and workshops of the House, followed by six weeks of employment in his workplace. During the full-time study phase they would be required to attend workshops and classes for 50-55 hours each week. Whilst working in his factory the *Apprenti* was expected to attend five two-hour evening classes and a four-hour class on a Saturday morning. Attendance at these classes was compulsory and enforced; whilst working the UK *Apprentis* reported a minimum weekly average of 14 hours devoted to classes, workshop practice and private study. Often this was supplemented by voluntary study on Saturday afternoon and Sundays. Therefore over an eight-week cycle of full-time study and work they received an average of 23 hours class and workshop time each week. It is difficult to establish international comparison for this volume of off-the-job learning owing to differences in national VET provision. Yet the most eloquent testimony as to its meaning came from the *Apprentis* themselves.

Dinner is at 19.00; everyone eats together; it's a bit formal with collars and ties expected. At 20.00 everyone is in the workshop doing homework, which can be a practical piece or theoretical exercises; or in a class following a course. This goes on every night, except Saturday and Sunday, until 22.00. You're also in classes on Saturday mornings between 08.00-12.00. Some *Apprentis* go out on a Friday night when class is finished, but a lot of them are too tired. Saturday afternoon and Sunday is free time, but people don't have a lot of money to spend. (Matt, UK *Apprenti*, Lille and Muizon Houses).

What is striking about the UK apprentices' comments is that the study regime was seen as very demanding, but not as onerous. Ben, who lived in the Toulouse House, commented:

I admit that for the first month I thought that I am not up to working this many hours, but after a while I thought that this is something special, it's a big tradition and that if you are up for the challenge then it is very rewarding one.

For another UK Apprentice the programme of study was a defining experience of the *Compagnonnage*. He said:

There are always classes on the night; it's a different week when they are not. When you do not have a class you can do what you want – but then you are not really in the *Compagnons* (Simon, UK *Apprenti*, Epône House).

When asked about his workload in the CdD as compared with that he had undertaken in the UK, Simon commented:

When I first arrived and was told that I would be doing night classes from Monday to Friday and Saturday morning, I thought this is not possible – there just is not enough time and there is not enough work. But you find you could do more. There is that much packed in. Before I started I thought two years is not really enough. But when I talk to some of my mates [in the UK] they have been doing three-year courses and they don't seem to be doing any work

compared with what I am doing. We do a lot more work – a lot more work. Once you get into it it's easy. Everyone is in the same boat.

This regime had two striking elements. The first was the extent to which it was enforced, by direct supervision and by economics. On average the UK apprentices were paid €577 net a month, the same as French *Apprentis*; House charges were €450 a month. There were tool allowances available, but these rarely covered the full cost. This meant that Apprentices' discretionary income was quite limited, but again this was not seen as a problem. One commented: "How do you make out? Living in the House and working all the time means that you don't actually need a lot of money".

Direct supervision was important. The UK *Apprentis* all commented on how they would be asked to account for themselves if found outside a class during scheduled work periods. One recounted how attendance at Saturday morning classes was encouraged by two *Compagnons* who overturned any bed they found occupied after 07.30. These constraints combined with a rigorous work schedule meant that there were few distractions from the classroom, book or workbench.

Second, the *Apprentis* actually welcomed this regime: words like "special", "challenge" and "rewarding" litter the interview transcripts. The régime was seen as demanding, but not punishing, as evidenced by their willingness to work extra hours to those demanded. This evidence draws attention to the importance of the volume of the HRD experience an aspect which is perhaps overshadowed at times by a pre-occupation with process. A second reason for the success of the system can be found in the wide range of HRD support offered to the learner. Amongst the many pillars supporting the learner were the near-peer and peer mentoring systems and the use of working (*Ancien*) and retired (*Sédentaire*) members.

Near-peer and peer mentoring

One of the most interesting aspects of the *Apprentis*' accounts is the extent to which the CdD relied on what has been identified as "near-peer mentoring" (Herzog and Herzog, 1999a; Herzog, 2001; Herzog and Herzog, 1998). The term refers to the practice of the CdD of appointing newly graduated *Compagnons* with less than three years post-*Compagnon* work experience to key positions of responsibility. The Herzogs (1998, 1999a and 2001) analyse the relationship between the *Apprenti* and the *Aspirant* on the one hand, and their *Maître de Stage* as that of "near-peer" mentoring. Appointments to these posts were reserved to *Compagnons* who were not much older than the learners they were guiding. This was a planned and deliberate strategy on the part of the CdD and its use seems to have been extended in recent years to include the *Prévôt* responsible for running the House. The Herzogs observe that these near-peers present themselves as positive role-models with whom *Apprentis* and *Aspirants* could form intense personal relationships (Herzog and Herzog, 1998, p. 6).

We found many examples to support this view of a relationship between learner and mentor which was so strong it could transcend language barriers. One UK *Apprenti* described how his *Maître de Stage* engaged with him in the absence of a common language:

He works here full time and lives in a flat on the premises. There are lessons every week and he teaches drawing and technology? What's he like? Cool and friendly. It's a weird relationship; I tend to use hand gestures quite a lot and somehow we understand each other – not always. If I was stuck with a piece of work, I would understand what he would be saying.

For example he would make a drawing of a job and as he spoke I would understand some of the words and I would remember them next time. One example is a piece I had to do – a square and I was not sure how to calculate the angles on the plate metal. He said I will not show you how to do it for a square; I'll show you how to do it for a different angle I remembered what he had said and then used the same process with the angle I was trying to get and it seemed OK. I followed that (Ben, UK *Apprenti*, Toulouse House.)

In other transcripts the *Maître* emerged as someone who encouraged *Apprentis* to progress to *Aspirant*; liaising with the *Anciens*, *Prévôts* and the workplace on the development of his charges; physically helping the youngsters to finish work tasks; and acting as a diplomat to resolve the interpersonal difficulties which inevitably occur in any community of more than hundred young people. In so doing they enacted some key messages of *le métier* and *le devoir* and rendered visible some pillars of the philosophy of the *Compagnons* namely mutual support, striving for success, fraternity and achievement of goals. Ben described one apparently small and apparently insignificant incident, but which was revealing to us, particularly when taken in conjunction with the lesson Ben took from the incident:

There are two lads, Michel and Simon who are working on their [*travail d'adoption*] and are pretty close to finishing it. This is taken seriously. Does anyone ever fail? Not that I know of. With the amount of hours that you do and the amount of help that you get, it's almost impossible to fail. The other night, Simon was stuck and the *Maître de Stage* helped him out a bit; he cut some metal and did some drilling for him. If you need help, you can get help. It is not a one-man job, you know (Ben, UK *Apprenti*, Toulouse House.)

The principle of near-peer mentoring extended beyond the hierarchy of the *Maître* and the *Apprenti*. We noted examples of the phenomena in the relationships between the *Aspirants* and the *Apprenti* and frequently it crossed trade boundaries. An earlier study noted that the *Compagnons* were not only highly skilled within their discipline, but multi-skilled: they could work in related trades (Malloch and Redman, 2005). Many of these polyvalent skills came from what *Apprentis* and *Aspirants* in different trades taught each other in the ordinary course of living and studying together. Five of the UK *Apprentis* in our study were sheet-metal workers, but they had been taught to mix cement by a stonemason, heat metal by a wrought-iron metal worker and to tap holes by a fitter. The sixth was a fitter; he had been taught to fit gaskets by a sheet-metal worker specialising in pipe-work.

These mentoring processes extended beyond the acquisition of technical skills; they embraced acculturation and socialisation. Manners and convention were important parts of life in the House and in France. These were imparted by the older members to the younger ones. One UK *Apprenti* described dinners; these were semi-formal occasions with dress codes and rituals.

Everyone has to shake hands with everyone else at the table; collars and ties were expected. The *Aspirants* are more formal; they try and teach the younger ones. You watched what they did. You've just got to try and follow them. (Gareth, UK *Apprenti*, Lyon House.)

At times it was difficult to maintain a distinction between near-peer and peer mentoring. Neither could it be seen as a unique feature of life in the CdD. There were many examples of such mentoring to be found in the *Apprentis*' accounts of life and work in the French factory. This leads us to conclude that it a general characteristic of French culture, rooted in the honour principle. It exists in an intense form in the CdD

where the philosophy of *transmettre le métier* and *le devoir* lay upon all a general obligation to improve upon the trade and to pass it on to all who could benefit from it.

The concept of near-peer mentoring is theoretically significant to the HRD student because there is little literature on near-peer or peer mentoring. For many the notion of “peer” and “mentoring” are incompatible. For Fagenson and Amendola (1993) a mentor is “an experienced, influential member of the organization” a definition which would appear specifically to exclude peers, especially at lower levels of the organization. Kram and Isabella (1985) clearly distinguish between “conventionally defined mentors” and peer relationships. For them the distinguishing features of mentoring are:

- There are “significant differences in age and hierarchical level” between the mentor and the mentee (p. 129). This is not the case in the CdD.
- That it is a “one-way helping dynamic”. In the CdD *le devoir* lays a general obligation on everyone to help all members of the community.
- Peer relationships last longer than that of the mentor and mentee. But the relationships between the *Maître* and the *Apprenti* can be long lasting and intense, placing the *Maître* much closer to the “*Meister*”, “*Hoça*” or “*Sensei*” than to the mentor.

The CdD experience shows that the definitions and relevance of distinctions between peer and mentors can only be interpreted in the light of the particular institutional context. The CdD is, in one sense, a cause devoted to the ideal of *transmettre le métier* and *le devoir*, moral goals accepted and internalised by all members, organizational purposes which elicited normative involvement from them. Seen in this light, distinctions between “mentoring”, “near-peer mentoring” and “peer mentoring” are neither useful nor relevant. Mentoring can come from anywhere in the organization or outside it as long as it is consistent with the CdD’s mission.

The relationship between the *Maître* and his charges has some parallels with what is known in Japan as the “*Sempai-Kohai*” relationship, a term which can be roughly translated into “older peer” and “younger peer” (*Journal of Japanese Cultural Arts*, 2003). Both the *Sempai* and the *Kohai* will very quickly assume their respective roles: the *Sempai* that of an older brother, a near-peer tutor, an informal guide and interpreter. The *Kohai*’s role is that of younger brother, who owes a very subtle form of respect to his *Sempai*, and is supposed to learn from him. Both are bound together by a certain loyalty. Japanese culture is based on *tate shakai*, or “vertical (or class) society.” This is a system that Westerners might compare to the relationship between a parent and child. In Japan it influences relationships between employer and employee, and teacher and student, in fact most relationships in Japan. In its ideal form it is a system of mutual service and duty, patronage and respect, alternating from one level to the other and back again.

Sempai-Kohai relationships can be found in families, groups of friends, schoolchildren, and, significantly for the present study, in Japanese corporate life. Newly hired young graduates are assigned a *Sempai*, typically a junior manager who has been hired a year or two before. The *Sempai* will smoothen his *Kohai*’s socialisation process, act as a role model, and provide psychological support; there are many overlaps here with the mentor’s role as defined by Fagenson and Amendola (1993).

A survey of the literature on mentoring reveals two points of interest for this study. First, peer mentoring has mostly been examined from a very utilitarian viewpoint, focusing on the cost-benefits of mentoring relationships, and especially social exchange theory (for example, see Ensher *et al.*, 2001). Second, the literature on peer mentoring suggests that it is of particular interest to HRD in health care, especially nursing (Davidhizar, 1995; Ensher *et al.*, 2001; Grant, 1994; Hader, 2004; Holbeche, 1996; Shaffer *et al.*, 2000; Smith, 2000; Tourigny and Pulich, 2005; Verdejo, 2002)

This conjunction of *Sempai-Kohai* relationship in Japanese organizations, nursing and the CdD raises the question of what these three institutions could have in common. We would suggest that all are highly institutionalised; that is, highly codified and complex organizations in the case of Japanese organizations and hospitals; and with a strong professional role marked by *le devoir* and *le métier*, in the case of the CdD and nursing. All possess many rituals and are marked by explicit and implicit behaviour codes. All three rely heavily on tacit knowledge. These requirements seem to be met in part by forms of near-peer mentoring. This analysis suggests that an understanding of their work transcends utilitarian considerations.

The involvement of *Anciens* and *Sédentaires*

Anciens and *Sédentaires* emerged as key figures in the development of the *Apprenti* and *Aspirant*. This was partly through the provision of pastoral support:

An *Ancien* is someone who is in the same trade as you; he's been through the whole system, done his Tour de France and he is still involved with the House. . . . Most of them are married and have children, but they still come to the House and talk to you about how things are going. They have meetings about the *Corporation* – your trade group – that live in the House. Some evenings you will go to their home and have a meal and have a drink. These are people you can ask anything you need. Normally you would ask them if you can do your *Travail d'Adoption*. You have to ask them and if they say that you can, then you go ahead. (Matt, UK *Apprenti*, Lille and Muizon Houses).

They were an additional learning resource available to the young learners in the House and took an active role in preparing the *Aspirant* for his *travail de réception*. In the quotation below the *Ancien*, like the *Maître de Stage*, gives living expression to key elements of the CdD mission such as mutual support, co-operation and nurturing.

They are the guys who set the work for the *travail de réception*. If you are an *Aspirant* in your second year, every year they are given work to do and the *Anciens* will come and have a look at what you have been doing, to see if you have been doing it correctly or if you have been doing it off-form. My *Ancien* used to come in sometimes on a Saturday when you were working in the House workshop. He would just pop around to see who is in the workshop and who is in the classroom and he would have a look at the [homework] that I had to do. He would give a helping hand if I was struggling. (Matt, UK *Apprenti*, Lille and Muizon Houses).

In conjunction with the *Maître de Stage* the *Ancien* also played an active part in assessing the progress of the *Apprenti* in formal meetings. One UK *Apprenti* described the process:

The *Ancien* arrives and talks to the *Maître de Stage*. He will tell the *Apprentis* to leave and they will discuss the *Apprentis* in private. . . . They bring in the *Apprentis* one by one and discuss the topics they discussed with the *Maître de Stage*, saying you are doing well here and not so well there. Then all the group will come in for a question and answer session –

what do you want to know, what do you want to do, where do you see your life going. Then afterwards there is an aperitif. (Darren, UK *Apprenti*, Dijon House).

Ancients and *Sédentaires* are closely involved in the assessment process. When an *Aspirant* decides to apply for acceptance as a *Compagnon* he must make a *chef d'oeuvre* for his *travail de réception*. Either an *Ancien* or *Sédentaire* guides him through the process. A *travail de réception* is more than carving an art-deco door or constructing a section of roofing in a particular style of tiling. The *Aspirant* must also prepare a report detailing the history of his chosen design, and justifying his choice of materials. This is an addition to a detailed plan of the *chef d'oeuvre*. His *Ancien* or *Sédentaire* is consulted at every step. When the design is finalised, the *Aspirant* makes a large-scale model of his *chef d'oeuvre*, which must be approved by the *Ancien* or *Sédentaire*. This yet another example both of the extent of the support offered to the learner in this system, and of the safeguards against failure.

The assessment of any *Aspirant* wishing to become a *Compagnon* fell into two distinct phases. The process lasted all day and during that period the House was closed for all other business. In the first instance his *chef d'oeuvre* was assessed by the *Compagnons* of his particular *Corporation* including *Sédentaires*, *Anciens* and *Maître de Stage*. They assessed *savoir-faire*; they looked for evidence of competent planning and execution of a high quality piece of craft work. This stage was conducted in public. Then they retire to discuss the *Aspirant's* competency, his social behaviour, as assessed by his contribution to the life of the House, his willingness to share knowledge, and his support for *Apprentis*. Following this the *Aspirant* is summoned to meet his examiners and the decision, almost invariably successful, is announced. There then follows a secret ritual in which the *Aspirant* is inducted as a *Compagnon*. *Aperitifs* and a formal dinner for the whole House follow.

The process of assessment and accreditation of expertise in the CdD is shown in Figure 2. It can be seen from Figure 2 that of the three dimensions of expertise identified in Figure 1 the French state assesses knowledge, but competency and skills remain the property of the CdD. The diagram also reflects our impression that state

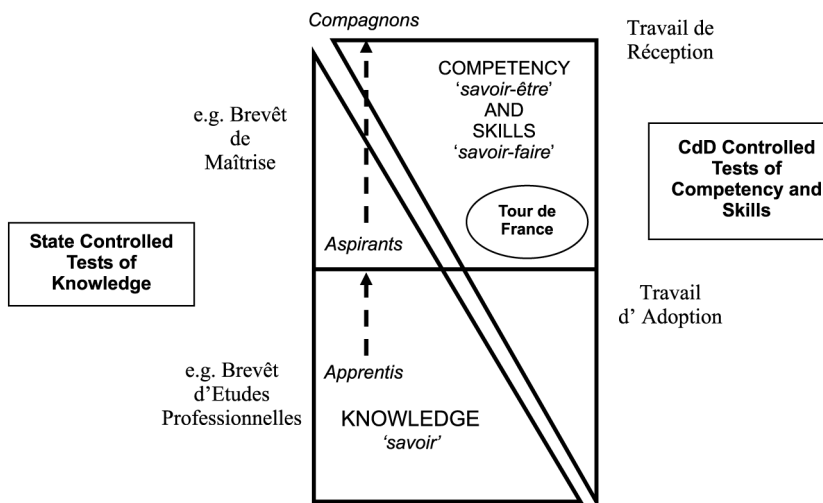


Figure 2.
The assessment and accreditation of knowledge, skills and competency in the CdD

controlled element of the assessment of knowledge becomes less important of as the young people progressed through the CdD, whilst the salience of the CdD controlled elements of assessment of *savoir-faire* and *savoir-être* increased. As we indicated previously, in theory the would-be *Compagnon* could pass from *Apprenti* to *Aspirant* to *Compagnon* without passing the state controlled examinations for the *Brevet d'Etudes Professionnelles* or the *Brevet de Maîtrise*.

There is no assessment documentation to help the CdD assessors in their assessment of candidates' *savoir-faire* and *savoir-être*. Benchmark statements, formal statements of learning outcomes, range indicators, check lists are entirely missing from this process. Rather the assessment of functional competence depends upon a combination of tacit knowledge and shared understandings supported by a process in which learning and assessment are closely interwoven. People who have lived and worked together with the candidate in a community for a period of up to eight years conduct the assessment of competency as *savoir-être*.

The management of spatial movement and change

A key feature of the system of training and development is the *Tour de France*, undertaken by *Aspirants* wishing to become a *Compagnon*. The assumption is that *Aspirants* can only become *Compagnons* by being exposed to, and learning from, different firm, industry and regional settings. Managing this process of continually changing exposures to new work place settings demanded a capacity for managing spatial flexibility – the ability to move learners through different towns and regions.

The *Tour de France* is an example of spatial flexibility as a strategy for promoting HRD. Twice a year, in a process known as *le changement de ville*, each *Aspirant* was required to change towns, Houses and employers. He had to find his place in a new community and integrate himself into a new workplace; he would be compelled to work with different employers, each with a different specialist market niche, different workshops, patterns of work organizations and different workforces. Living in different regions exposed the learner to different foods, local cultures and tastes. In recent years many *Aspirants* have gone abroad, thus substituting a *Tour du Monde* for the *Tour de France*, a globalisation of learning with all its implications for personal growth and development. *Apprentis* did not have a *Tour de France*, but they did have an element of mobility in their *Stages*. Many had to change Houses to receive the specialist teaching that was necessary for training. Further, when *Apprentis* were on *Stage* in their mother House, they would usually receive *Apprentis* from other Houses attending the course. So in this sense the world of the *Compagnonnage* provided an ever-shifting constellation of new faces, new places, different workplaces and practices. As one of the UK *Apprentis* commented: "It forces you to change".

What makes this mobility possible is the network of Houses. A single House is of little value, but the network gives the CdD a means of changing working and cultural environments for *Aspirants*. It not only offered flexibility, but also offered a degree of robustness which enabled the system to withstand disruptions to training caused by factory closures and de-skilling. If an *Aspirant* found that his firm had been taken over, or that his work was no longer offering him the skilled work he required, then he could change Houses and employers. The network provided buffers against environmental tendencies such as Taylorism, massification and takeover that could have removed

opportunities for the skilled, culturally rich training offered by the CdD. We found examples of this in our interviews.

Conclusions

The case suggests several modifications to HRD theory in general, and to Swanson's model in particular. First, to describe the CdD as an organization concerned with human resource development is to miss the point; rather it is an institution which exists to develop both humans and the crafts which it represents, with forming the whole man, and not just his technical training. His humanity, awareness, his socialisation and his acculturation are all concerns. What the case also suggests is that the distinction between the technically competent worker as defined by *savoir* and *savoir-faire*; and the skilled human being, as defined by *savoir-être* is a false one. Technical skills are developed by a training which is rich in culture and humanity and not just about technical functioning: these are complements, not competitors. Further, the CdD did this for normative rather than economic reasons. It was done neither for personal gain (financial or career advancement), nor corporate profit. It could be concluded therefore that the conception of human resource development as an activity focused on human resource management, career development and quality improvement, and tied to the improvement of the performance of the employing organization is too narrow.

Second, the case points to the limitations of Swanson's choice of "theoretical foundations"; that is psychology, economics and systems theory (Swanson, 2001, pp. 304-5). The data presented on peer and near-peer mentoring suggest a need for a theoretical approach to HRD which allows researchers to understand wider organizational contexts than those bounded by Swanson's three disciplines, one where HRD policies such as mentoring, are not seen as a means to an end, but as an integral part of a very coherent institutional environment. These contexts can be found in organizations that are institutionally grounded in concepts such as *le devoir* and *le métier*. HRD and its supporting practices cannot be separated from the overall functioning of the organization. An institutional perspective of an organization and its HRD is required. This can only be fully achieved if it includes an anthropological view. From this perspective Swanson's (2001, p. 306) three-legged stool (is missing a theoretical leg – anthropology).

Third, the case raises questions about the identity of Swanson's "HRD professionals" (2001, p. 304). It is clear that the CdD is a "community of practice" (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998), but the case shows that key members of this community were *Sédentaires* and *Anciens*, former members of the Houses. The CdD proved itself very adept at using them as resources to help the development and assessment of the younger members. This raises the possibility of using retired workers in HRD programmes. The *Anciens* and *Sédentaires* themselves point to the fact that the CdD is a successful organization run and managed by workers, rather than "HRD professionals". This can be seen as pointing the way to HRD strategies which more fully embrace workers, and see it less of a preserve of the HRD "professional", or management. The presence of the worker in the CdD model of HRD in turn draws attention to the neglected role of workers and the bodies, which represent them certainly in the formal processes of learning and assessment.

The case draws attention to the importance of the volume of learning and the social context in which it was transmitted; both combine here to make failure a near impossibility. Finally the case suggests that there is another dimension to the repertoire of flexibility. To the better-known numerical, functional and financial flexibilities must be added a fourth – spatial flexibility. In this case it emerges as central to the creation of knowledge, skills and competency.

Notes

1. A *Compagnon* is a fully qualified member of Les Compagnons du Devoir.
2. A *Maison* is a place of residence and study owned by the CdD; the words maison and House are used interchangeably.
3. An *Apprenti* is a term used to describe an apprentice in the first two years of a French apprenticeship.
4. A *Maître de Stage* is in charge of the training of a specific trade group in a House.
5. A *Prévôt* is working in the CdD in some general management post, such as running a House.

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About the authors

Hedley Malloch is an academic working in the IÉSEG School of Management, Catholic University of Lille where he teaches Strategy and HRM. Research interests include the Compagnonnage and comparative national systems of human resource development. He holds a PhD from the University of Glasgow and he serves on the Editorial Advisory Boards of the *Journal of Vocational Education and Training* and *Personnel Review*. Hedley Malloch is the corresponding author and can be contacted at: h.malloch@ieseg.fr

Birgit Kleymann is a Senior Assistant Professor of Strategy and Organization at the the IÉSEG School of Management, Catholic University of Lille in France. She holds a PhD from the Helsinki School of Economics. Her current research focuses on the development of loosely coupled organizational systems, such as multilateral alliances, large heterogeneous organizations and social networks.

Jacques Angot is Assistant Professor in Management at the IÉSEG School of Management, Catholic University of Lille. Past research interests include decision making processes and the unexpected consequences on action; definitions and measurement of rationality in organization theory. He is currently working on the idea of critical management learning; that is new ways of teaching, talent management and aesthetics in the management – management as art and art as management.

Tom Redman is Professor of Human Resource Management in Durham Business School, Durham University. His current research includes projects on leadership and organizational, union and occupational commitment.