The thinking styles of human resource practitioners

Paul Higgins
Department of Public and Social Administration, City University of Hong Kong, Kowloon, Hong Kong, and
Li-fang Zhang
Faculty of Education, The University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong

Abstract
Purpose – Drawing upon Sternberg’s theory of mental self-government, this paper aims to investigate the thinking styles and workplace experiences of 152 human resource (HR) practitioners pursuing Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) membership. It seeks to explore whether their thinking styles complemented their jobs and consider the implications for the CIPD’s notion of the “thinking performer”.

Design/methodology/approach – A two-part questionnaire, including the Thinking Styles Inventory-Revised II (Sternberg et al.) is completed by the research participants to identify their Type I (creativity-generating) and Type II (norm-favouring) thinking styles. Six focus group sessions are also conducted to gather insights about the participants’ workplace experiences.

Findings – On average, participants scored more highly on Type I thinking styles. Although this suggested their thinking styles are consistent with the “thinking performer” ideal, focus group participants doubted whether the creativity-generating attributes of Type I suited the reality of the HR function, which is described as being awash with rule bound behaviours. Particularly, this is the experience of junior staff, who felt unable to challenge senior management or contribute to the bigger picture. Correlation coefficients revealed that age, length of service with current organization and perceived autonomy at work are the most significant socialisation variables.

Practical implications – Emphasis on strategic matters in CIPD courses needs to be balanced with a greater recognition of the operational and routine reality of much HR practice.

Originality/value – This represents the first known attempt to test thinking performer construct amongst HR practitioners. The study combines questionnaire and focus group methods.

Keywords Thinking styles, Human resource management

Paper type Research paper

Introduction
In 2002, the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) – the UK’s leading professional body for those involved in the management and development of people – reframed its professional standards around the notion of the “thinking performer”. The “thinking performer” represents a description of an ideal human resource (HR) practitioner, someone who is able to “add value” to the organisation in

The authors would like to thank all research participants for their valuable time and contributions, particularly during the focus group interviews. A special mention of thanks is extended to Sharon McMahon and Andre Kyriakou for their additional focus group offerings. The authors are also grateful for the helpful comments and suggestions of two anonymous reviewers.
which they are employed because they are capable of and willing to constantly challenge the way things are executed (CIPD, 2004).

On its web site, the CIPD contrasts the “thinking performer” archetype with three other, inferior, types of HR practice which it refers to as the “lifetime liability”, the “wish-list dreamer” and the “automated bureaucrat.” The four resulting types are then depicted in a two-by-two “thinking performer” matrix whose quadrants are distinguished via a vertical axis representing different degrees of effectiveness – conceptualised as “doing the right things-thinking” – and a horizontal axis representing different degrees of efficiency – conceptualised as “doing things right-performing”. Figure 1 reproduces the thinking performer matrix and provides a brief description of each of the four quadrants therein.

It can be seen from Figure 1 that the “thinking performer” quadrant, situated in the upper right of the matrix, is portrayed in terms of the “strategic activist,” someone who is willing and able to challenge the status quo position and to demand more from what is currently being delivered in their place of work. The remaining three quadrants are then negatively contrasted with this ideal whose shortcomings vary according to their lack or efficiency and/or effectiveness. Thus, the “wish list dreamer” quadrant, located in the upper left of the matrix, is depicted in terms of someone lacking efficiency because of their failure to communicate their (effective) ideas to others. The “automated bureaucrat” quadrant, positioned in the lower right of the matrix, is then depicted as someone who is efficient in terms of (accurately and speedily) doing what they are told but who also lacks effectiveness through not being willing to challenge what is done or through not considering ways of doing things differently (more effectively). Finally, the “lifetime liability” quadrant, in the lower left of the matrix, is expressed in terms of someone who lacks competence on the grounds of both efficiency and effectiveness.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>High effectiveness</th>
<th>Wish-list dreamer</th>
<th>Thinking performer</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Low effectiveness</td>
<td>Lifetime liability</td>
<td>Automated bureaucrat</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1) Lower left: the Lifetime Liability - the employee who neither performs nor thinks yet devote a good deal of time and energy to the development of "reasons" why agreed outputs are unattainable and tasks unfulfilled.

2) Upper left: the Wish-List Dreamer - the thinking non-performer who, if he has ideas, keeps them to himself.

3) Lower right: the Automated Bureaucrat - the non-thinking performer who does what s/he's told and no more. S/he carries out instructions blindly, without necessarily knowing (or caring) about their purpose.

4) Upper right: the Thinking Performer - the "strategic activist" employee who adds value through continuous challenge and self-imposed improvement goals. Specifically in the personnel area, the Thinking Performer is the person who amongst other things needs to think, "Why do I do this?" or "How could we do this different or better?"

Source: CIPD website
One assumption behind the matrix is that current HR practice in a UK context is characterised by behaviours depicted in the three inferior quadrants of the CIPD matrix and as such a thinking performer deficit exists amongst HR practitioners. Moreover, it is a gap that needs to be addressed if the HR profession is to have a positive impact on the performance of organisation – often referred to as the “Holy Grail of HR management”. This view gains credence when one considers that concomitant with the development of the “thinking performer” matrix, the CIPD has also been active in championing the progression of the HR profession away from a focus on operational matters and towards a strategic orientation (CIPD, 2004; Whittaker and Johns, 2004). One implication of this is that in strategically upgrading the HR profession, “thinking performer” properties should be prevalent amongst all HR practitioners and at all levels of the organisation. Figure 2 visualises the role of the “thinking performer” construct within the CIPD’s aim to strategically re-orientate the HR profession.

This CIPD’s attempt to effectively upgrade day-to-day personnel management towards strategic issues has proven to be controversial, however, not least because it is not considered by some to be appropriate for the types of workplace practice demanded of the majority of staff employed in the HR profession which tend towards more nuts-and-bolts issues (Hope-Hailey et al., 2005). That is to say, most HR practitioners do not engage themselves with strategic issues nor particularly do they challenge how things are currently undertaken in their organisation but rather they follow established rules; do what they are told and generally feel unable to contest the views of senior management (Francis and Keegan, 2006). Another concern is that in shifting the focus of the entire profession away from operational to strategic matters, it could leave other employees feeling increasingly estranged from their HR department (Guest and King, 2004).

In the light of the controversy that has surrounded the introduction of the “thinking performer” construct, this paper addresses two issues which lie at the heart of the matter. The first issue is “How far do HR practitioners actually measure up to the ‘thinking performer’ ideal?” That is to say, to what extent is there a thinking performer deficit amongst UK based HR practitioners? The second issue is “To what extent are the types of strategically orientated and thinking performer type level of training implicated by the CIPD’s matrix relevant to the workplace experiences actually encountered by HR practitioners?”

![Figure 2. Broader rationale for CIPD’s “thinking performer” construct](image-url)
In exploring these two issues, the paper sets out by aligning the “thinking performer” and “automated bureaucrat” dimensions of the CIPD’s thinking performer matrix to the longstanding and rigorously tested domain of thinking styles (Zhang and Sternberg, 2005, 2006). The rationale for exclusively focusing on the “thinking performer” and “automated bureaucrat” quadrants of the CIPD matrix is that they are both active as a result of their efficiency (see vertical axis in Figure 1) and, therefore, amenable to measurement. The “wish list dreamer,” in contrast, is marked by a failure to act upon the ideas generated, while the lifetime liability is inactive on both counts of efficiency and effectiveness. Moreover, in drawing from the domain of thinking styles and, in particular, on Stenberg’s (1988, 1997) theory of mental government a degree of objectivity and impartiality to the controversy can be introduced. As the following section further demonstrates, the behaviour attributed to the “thinking performer” and “automated bureaucrat” dimensions of the CIPD matrix strongly resonate with what are referred to as Type I and Type II thinking styles, and can, therefore, serve as useful proxies for them.

**Thinking styles and thinking performer: a conceptual alignment**

Thinking styles, like other style constructs such as cognitive styles and learning styles are one of the many style constructs under the notion of intellectual styles (Zhang and Sternberg, 2006) that refer to people’s preferred ways of processing information. As one of the most recent theories of intellectual styles, Stenberg’s (1988, 1997) theory of mental self-government has propelled much research interest in the scholarly community. Using “government” as a metaphor, Stenberg proposed that just as there are different ways of governing a society, there are different ways that people prefer to use their abilities. These preferences in using one’s abilities are defined as thinking styles.

According to Stenberg, there are 13 such thinking styles that can be classified into five dimensions: functions, forms, levels, scopes, and leanings. Drawing on empirical data, Zhang and Stenberg (2005, 2006) re-conceptualized the 13 thinking styles into three types. Type I thinking styles are creativity-generating and denote higher levels of cognitive complexity, including the legislative (being creative), judicial (evaluative of other people or products), hierarchical (prioritizing one’s tasks), global (focusing on the holistic picture), and liberal (taking new approaches to tasks) styles. Type II thinking styles, by contrast, suggest a norm-favouring tendency and denote lower levels of cognitive complexity, including the executive (implementing tasks with prescribed procedures), local (focusing on concrete and discrete details), monarchic (working on one task at a time), and conservative (using traditional approaches to tasks) styles. Finally, the Type III thinking style embodies the anarchic (working on whatever tasks that come along), oligarchic (working on multiple tasks with no priority), internal (working on one’s own), and external (working with others) styles. Type III styles may manifest the characteristics of the styles from both Type I and Type II groups, depending on the stylistic demands of a specific task. For example, one could be creative (i.e. using Type I styles) or conservative (i.e. using Type II styles) whether when one works alone (internal style) or when one works in collaboration with others (external style), depending on the nature of the specific task at hand.

It can be seen from the above descriptions of Type I and Type II thinking styles that there is a large degree of correspondence with them and the sort of behaviours that the
CIPD attributes, respectively, to the “thinking performer” and “automated bureaucrat” quadrants of its matrix. Thus, akin to the CIPD’s description of the “thinking performer” construct the five Type I thinking styles capture behaviour that entails judgement and creativity. Likewise, akin to the CIPD’s description of the “automated bureaucrat” construct the four Type II thinking styles capture behaviour that involves a local focus and adherence to pre-set rules and procedures. If one accepts the case made for aligning these two types of thinking styles to the two active quadrants of the CIPD’s thinking performer matrix then the first research question becomes “to what extent do HR practitioners actually report Type I and Type II thinking styles”? In other words, how far do they currently measure up to the thinking performer ideal? Once this ground is established, attention can then turn to the second research question regarding workplace experiences.

Method
In all, 152 adults, each of whom currently enrolled on part-time post-graduate level CIPD-accredited HRM courses in one of two London-based Universities, participated in this research between October 2007 and February 2008. These participants have all sought graduate and/or chartered CIPD membership and, at the time of research, were employed in a HR position, either on a full or part-time basis. 24 of the respondents were male and 128 female. With an average age of 31 and a mean of 29, the participants’ ages ranged from 21 to 50. With an average of four years and a median of three years, the length of service with their organizations ranged from one year to 30 years. The sizes of the organizations for which the participants were working varied from 6 employees to 1 million, with a median of 368 people. Within this group, one person did not receive formal education, 48 were qualified up to Higher National Diploma level, 90 people held a degree and 12 a Masters degree.

Measures
A survey composed of two parts was administered to the research participants. One part was the Thinking Styles Inventory-Revised II (TSI-R2, Sternberg et al., 2007) – the second modified version of the Thinking Styles Inventory (TSI Sternberg and Wagner, 1992) based on the theory of mental self-government. Consisting of 65 statements, the inventory assesses the 13 thinking styles delineated in the theory, with each five statements contributing to the assessment of one of the thinking styles. Five of the thirteen thinking styles form the Type I scale; four of the thirteen thinking styles form the Type II scale and a further four of the thirteen thinking styles form the Type III scale. For each statement, the participants rated themselves on a seven-point Likert scale, with 1 indicating that the statement does not at all represent the way they normally carry out their tasks, and seven denoting that the statement characterizes extremely well the way they normally carry out their tasks. Two sample items are:

1. “When faced with a problem, I use my own ideas and strategies to solve it” (legislative style).
2. “I like to figure out how to solve a problem following certain rules” (executive style).

The administration of this questionnaire was predominantly used to test the prevalence of the thinking performer deficit.
The second part of the questionnaire elicited participants’ personal characteristics (age, gender, educational level, length of service in their then-current job, previous work experience in other organizations), actual work environments (size of the organization in which one was employed, type of organization, work function, salary level, and work position), and perceived work environments (view of one’s salary level, perceived autonomy at work, and perceived level of future success). The administration of this questionnaire allowed the authors to ascertain both the nature of the actual workplaces that the participants worked in and their perceptions of it.

Focus group interviews
In considering further the participants experiences of their workplace, six post-questionnaire focus group[1] interview sessions comprising approximately a third of the participants in total were facilitated by the first author to examine a range of issues relating to their work practices and experience, relationship with managers and job motivation[2]. These included a discussion of: the participants’ general preference to follow prescribed procedures as opposed to using their own creativity, the participants’ perceived level of discretion at work, the extent to which participants feel they were gravitated towards the HR position because it suited them compared with being socialised by the experience and the extent to which they felt they could challenge the views of senior management. During the focus group interview sessions, participants were encouraged to share their HR work experiences, to bounce ideas and issues off one another and to probe one another’s viewpoints so that their points could be justified. In terms of data capture and analysis, notes were taken during the event with tape recordings also made and key content transcribed verbatim for analysis. Finally, to guard against undue influence and domination of some participants, the focus group interviewees were also invited to submit by email any other comments to the researcher for further consideration. After all of the information from the focus group sessions had been collected, the material was examined to identify content about the issues at hand and these were extracted from the reviews and subject to further analysis and comparison.

Reliability: thinking styles inventory-revised II
Reliability estimates for the TSI-R2 were obtained using Cronbach’s (1951) alphas. The alpha coefficients obtained for the TSI-R2 scales were 0.80 (legislative), 0.78 (executive), 0.71 (judicial), 0.64 (global), 0.618 (local), 0.86 (liberal), 0.81 (conservative), 0.73 (hierarchical), 0.66 (monarchic), 0.78 (oligarchic), 0.70 (anarchic), 0.66 (internal), and 0.79 (external). These internal scale reliabilities are similar in magnitude with those reported in previous studies using the TSI-R (Fan, 2006; Zhang and Higgins, 2008), except that the alpha coefficient for the anarchic style has been improved dramatically from a typical low of 0.40.

Thinking styles – examining the thinking performer deficit
The mean scores and standard deviations of participants’ thinking styles were calculated and the results are presented in Table I. Considered as a whole, a particularly noticeable trait amongst the participants was that they displayed an external (working with others) rather than an internal (working on their own) thinking style, with a preference also for prioritising their tasks (hierarchical), albeit with
prescribed rules and procedures (executive). On average, the participants scored the lowest on the global thinking style, indicative of a non-holistic outlook, though both the liberal (taking new approaches to tasks) style and judicial (evaluative of other people or products) style were higher up the scale.

At first glance, the participants’ mean average scores for thinking styles suggests that they demonstrated a slightly greater propensity to display Type I as opposed to Type II thinking styles. This conclusion can be interpreted from the rankings provided in Table I which reveal that four out of the five Type I thinking styles are located in the upper half of the table, whereas three of the four Type II thinking styles are located in the lower half of the table. Such a finding could, therefore, question the claim that HR practitioners seeking graduate and/or chartered CIPD membership are necessarily lacking in their “thinking performer” prowess. Before reaching this conclusion, however, it is necessary to consider the influence of the participants’ workplace on their actual HR practice. In doing this, recourse to some of the insights gained from the focus group exercises will also be reported.

**Workplace experiences: insights from focus group exercise**

First, although the participants expressed a preference for prioritising tasks (hierarchical) evidence from the focus group sessions gave some insight into the type of constraints that followed thereafter. This was particularly noticeable in terms of being required to carry out many of their HR tasks in with prescribed procedures (executive) thus leading to a combined hierarchical and executive approach as reported from the questionnaire responses. One such example of this workplace behaviour drawn from the focus group exercise is as follows:

> Naturally, I would want freedom to deal with tasks using my own initiative, yet in the company I work in I am the opposite I want to make sure I am following best practice because I am always aware of the implications of getting things wrong.

Note the interesting use of the term “best practice” in this previous quote. Best practice in this context means following established procedures rather than adhering to the
values of the “thinking performer” construct. Another participant added: “In HR you are supposed to ensure that you follow the rules, although you can also be given discretion about precisely in what order you must do things”.

Perhaps, the most striking finding that came out of the focus groups was an almost total rejection of the idea that one could challenge the views of senior management in any meaningful way. This sentiment can be summarised by the following comment raised by a focus group participant:

Unless you are senior management your suggestions are not taken on board and you are often given lower grade work to complete. You are not given any time to work on improving your job or finding better ways of providing services.

Another focus group participant similarly added: “Within my HR department, you are not able to make real decisions and middle management and below do the ‘bitty’ work that does not contribute in a meaningful way to the big picture”.

A third focus group participant, meanwhile, took a slightly different view: I see the role of HR to advise the managers what to do it is ultimately their decision. But you have to tell them the consequences of the decision but it is their choice to make. As HR experts we manage the risks. That’s our job to do that. They ultimately make the decisions we are risk managers.

In either case, many of the focus group respondents agreed that the nature of their HR job is awash with detailed procedures and rule-bound behaviours with too much paperwork, mundane activity and too little variety, all indicative of a lack of real discretion. For example, one participant explained:

When I am working I like to do things very methodically and if I do that it requires time, but there are deadlines and constraints which means that I cannot do it as thoroughly as I would like to and that does impact on how I work.

In many respects, findings from the latest (fifth) Workplace Employment Relations Survey (Kersley et al., 2006), a nationally representative account of the state of employment relations and working life inside British workplaces, provide support to the types of comments raised by the focus group participants. In addition to identifying personnel management as a fairly low status occupation that is disproportionately represented by females in the more junior jobs, Kersley et al. (2006) found that local managers expressed more discretion when making decisions about the quantity and quality of the products than when they made decisions about employment relations matters.

What tentatively emerges from the questionnaire and focus group evidence then is that whilst the participants reported a preference for Type I, thinking performer-type styles, the constraints of their workplace prevented them from practicing this potential. This view was summarised by one focus contributor by reference to what she saw as the ideal properties of a new HR recruit: “If you were going to recruit a new person for HR you would not recruit a creativity-type person”.

Before reaching any conclusions, however, it is important to mention the findings that emerged from the analysis of the relationships between the overt and covert socialization variables and participants’ thinking styles. As demonstrated below, this exercise led to a more interesting picture.

**Insights from correlations**

Pearson correlation coefficients were calculated to measure the relationships between the overt and covert socialization variables and participants’ thinking styles.
Results indicate that the most striking correlations occurred between certain thinking styles and age, length of service with current organization and perceived autonomy at work. As can be seen from Table II, the participants’ age was negatively correlated with the executive, local, conservative, oligarchic and anarchic thinking styles. The length of time participants had been working in their current organisation was negatively correlated with the executive and conservative thinking styles but positively correlated with the global and liberal thinking styles. Perceived autonomy at work was negatively correlated with the executive and conservative thinking style but positively related to the judicial, global, liberal, hierarchical, anarchic and external thinking styles.

In terms of the age dimension, the analysis suggests that the older the respondents were, the more likely it was they were to have discretion at work and consequently the less inclined they were to use a traditional approach to tasks and also without the need to prioritise them. Older respondents also appeared to express less need to work both on “whatever tasks come along” and in “prescribed ways with concrete details”. This behaviour is arguably a function of their relative experience and maturity in contrast to younger participants and which might be further conflated with the length of time the participant has been in their current organisation[3].

Moving on to the number of years participants had been in their current organisation this was also found to be negatively correlated with an executive style (prescribed rules) and using the traditional approach (conservative) but was positively correlated with a preference for the global (holistic) style and a liberal (new approaches) style – both a function of relative seniority and maturity perhaps. Thus, the tentative picture that emerged from the analysis of these first two overt socialisation variables was the growth and progression of an employee as they move up the hierarchy in their organisation.

Finally, the perceived autonomy at work (covert) variable was correlated, at a significant level, with many more of the thinking styles than the other two (overt) variables and the relationships were somewhat stronger too. Again, the identified correlations make substantive sense with greater perceived autonomy at work positively correlated with creative (legislative), evaluative (judicial), holistic (global) and liberal Type I styles but negatively correlated with conservative and executive Type II styles.

In summary, then, although working at the top-level of HR departments may require high levels of creative thinking such as in decision making and designating priorities to tasks to be dealt with, lower level workforce serving at HR’s departments might not normally be in a position to engage in strategic decision making or to try new strategies in dealing with their work situations. On the contrary, they are more likely to find themselves being responsible for adhering to rules and procedures rather than for determining them. Even in situations where members of the ordinary HR workforce are given the opportunity to think creatively, such as in designing training packages, they might still tend to be constrained by senior management objectives.

Conclusions and implications
This paper began by providing an outline of the CIPD’s “thinking performer” matrix which has been created as part of a broader attempt to change the “mindset” of the HR profession by “upgrading” it in a more strategic direction. In tune with this aim, a key
Table II. Correlation between most striking socialisation variables and thinking styles of human resource managers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>LEG</th>
<th>EXE</th>
<th>JUD</th>
<th>GLORA</th>
<th>LOCA</th>
<th>LIB</th>
<th>CON</th>
<th>HIER</th>
<th>MONA</th>
<th>OLI</th>
<th>ANA</th>
<th>INT</th>
<th>EXT</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>-0.041</td>
<td>-0.183*</td>
<td>-0.118</td>
<td>0.081</td>
<td>-0.210*</td>
<td>0.085</td>
<td>-0.174*</td>
<td>-0.143</td>
<td>-0.120</td>
<td>-0.228**</td>
<td>-0.209*</td>
<td>-0.041</td>
<td>-0.102</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. of years in org</td>
<td>0.078</td>
<td>-0.288**</td>
<td>-0.047</td>
<td>0.198*</td>
<td>-0.124</td>
<td>0.205*</td>
<td>-0.278**</td>
<td>-0.003</td>
<td>-0.114</td>
<td>-0.153</td>
<td>-0.052</td>
<td>-0.058</td>
<td>-0.010</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Freedom</td>
<td>0.433**</td>
<td>-0.245**</td>
<td>0.315**</td>
<td>0.254**</td>
<td>-0.067</td>
<td>0.429**</td>
<td>-0.306**</td>
<td>0.332**</td>
<td>0.024</td>
<td>0.242**</td>
<td>0.295**</td>
<td>0.134</td>
<td>0.424**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Correlation is significant at the *0.05 and **0.01 level (2-tailed), respectively.
The purpose behind CIPD-accredited training programmes is to allow candidates to address a thinking performer deficit so that they can add value to their workplace. This aim has proven to be controversial, however, and in seeking to get to the heart of the matter, this paper delved into the establishing the current picture with respect to reported thinking styles and workplace practices amongst HR practitioners pursuing CIPD membership.

Although the findings from the paper did not identify a thinking performer deficit amongst research participants by revealing an overall tendency amongst the participants to report a preference for Type I thinking styles, the coefficient correlations revealed a slightly more complicated picture. In particular, an age and experience effect was identified with the conditions prevalent in many HR positions, as voiced via the focus group exercises, simply not considered to be conducive to the kind of thinking performer behaviour promoted by the CIPD. Indeed, the most striking finding to emerge from the focus group exercise was the view amongst the majority of participants that they cannot challenge the views of senior management – they are simply not allowed to or are simply not listened to. Thus, whilst a number of HR practitioners expressed behaviour in their workplace that was consistent the “wish-list dreamer” the propensity for them to keep their ideas to themselves was not necessarily a function of inadequacy but of contextual constraints.

Given these findings, it seems that the CIPD’s aim to upgrade the HR profession as a whole, via its thinking performer construct, needs to be rethought in such a way as to accommodate the workplace reality that characterises much of the HR experience and to tailor courses accordingly. One suggestion in this regard, is that the “thinking performer” construct is used not to reflect the types of behaviour that is necessary for all HR functions, as currently designed, but rather to enhance the personal and career development of qualifying CIPD members by allowing them, via training and academic learning of the sort accredited by the CIPD, to move out of their low-level operational jobs and onto something more strategic in orientation. In this way, the important day-to-day operational work of the HR department could be retained and performed by those not yet sufficiently qualified. This reinterpretation of the rationale for the thinking performer matrix gains strong support from this study in that those participants with greater experience tended to demonstrate greater propensity to display Type I thinking behaviour. A summary of this alternative rationale for the thinking performer construct, replacing Figure 2, is provided in Figure 3. It visualises

![Figure 3. Alternative rationale for CIPD's “thinking performer” construct](image-url)

### Qualifying candidate progression

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategic</th>
<th>Organisational hierarchy</th>
<th>Operational</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>CIPD thinking performer</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Candidate progression</td>
<td>Unqualified</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

286
the role of the “thinking performer” construct within a new aim to enhance the individual opportunities of candidates as they progress up the hierarchy.

What then, finally, are the implications of these findings for future CIPD candidates, as well as people educating and certifying HR managers and senior managers in companies? In terms of CIPD candidates undertaking CIPD programmes it is recommended that they use the channels available to them to express their concerns about the relevance of CIPD course content to their workplace experiences and developmental needs. In reflexively adopting thinking performer type behaviour they should themselves question taken for granted claims about workplace reality by more fully expressing their experiences of being an HR practitioner in ways not always depicted in the text books (Sennett, 1999; Williams, 2007).

The present findings could also be helpful to people educating and certifying HR managers by making them realise that the emphasis on strategic matters in CIPD courses might need to be balanced with a greater recognition of the operational and routine reality of much HR practice, particularly at the far bulkier lower level. Moreover, in making CIPD-accredited qualifications better match the actual experiences of those engaged in HR this also means accommodating the tricky and critical subjects of power and employee voice (Higgins and Croucher, 2008). In this way, qualifying-CIPD practitioners might just be able to better apply what they have learnt via accredited study into practice rather than necessarily feeling that they have abstracted from reality with recalls to some marginal strategic orientation that affects only a small elite. Otherwise, HR practitioners working at a very junior level of HRM could “feel alienated” from the image of the thinking performer as depicted as someone working at a strategic decision-making level. This point is particularly important to bear in mind if CIPD-accredited academic programmes and training courses are intended to allow students to put theory into practice.

Finally, in terms of senior management in companies, it is perhaps important that they first recognise the implications of sending their employees on courses to gain CIPD-accreditation given what their employees are likely to learn and the likely relevance and appropriateness of this learning to the workplace. When such investments are made it is recommended that senior managers create work environments that are conducive to allowing such thinking styles to thrive in their organisation – styles that are critical to the successful operation of an organisation. In particular, they could become more mindful of listening to their employees and made aware that thinking styles could also be shaped by work context.

Notes
1. “Focus groups are a form of group interview in which a process of dialogue and discussion between a number of participants about a particular topic provides data to help answer your research question” (Anderson, 2004, p. 158).

2. Researchers recommend aiming for homogeneity within each group in order to capitalise on people’s shared experiences. One advantage of using pre-existing groups is that friends and colleagues can relate to each other’s comments to incidents in their shared daily lives (Kitzinger, 1995).

3. A variable which incidentally and reassuringly correlates strongly with age (0.584 significant at 0.01 level).
References


Further reading
About the authors
Paul Higgins is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Public and Social Administration, City University Hong Kong. He teaches and researches in the areas of human resource management and public sector management. His research has been published in a number of internationally recognised human resource management, educational psychology and public sector management journals.

Li-fang Zhang is an Associate Dean (Research Higher Degrees) in the Faculty of Education, The University of Hong Kong. She has published extensively in the field of intellectual styles and in related areas of study, including cognitive development, creativity, giftedness, and psychosocial development. Her contributions to the scholarly community are widely recognized. One such recognition is her appointment to the editorial board of Educational Psychology Review and that of Educational Psychology, two of the top refereed international journals in educational psychology. Li-fang Zhang is the corresponding author and can be contacted at: ifzhang@hku.hk

To purchase reprints of this article please e-mail: reprints@emeraldinsight.com
Or visit our web site for further details: www.emeraldinsight.com/reprints