

Developing a Culture of Learning

Strategies for
Organizational
Achievement



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Survey Overview

Target Survey Population

The target population for this research was talent development professionals across different organizations and industries. Participants from 304 unique organizations completed the survey.

Survey Instrument

The survey was composed of 31 questions including those related to the demographics of the respondents.

Procedure

ATD Research distributed a link to an online survey to the target population in April 2021. The survey closed in May 2021.

About the Sponsor



A Note From Schoox

Schoox is a proud supporter of ATD and its thousands of members and customers who dedicate themselves to building cultures of learning and development in organizations around the world. It's not always easy taking a company from a compliance training mindset and transforming into a thriving culture that integrates learning, skills, development, performance, and experience. So, stay the course, stay resilient, and keep coming back for more ATD content like this report.

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Executive Summary

With disruption occurring at an unprecedented pace, it's more important than ever for organizations to nurture cultures of learning if they want to remain competitive. As the *Forbes* technology council points out, a team is only as effective as its knowledge base, and the knowledge needed to succeed changes rapidly.¹ According to BizLibrary, "A culture that prizes learning adapts to changes quickly and without losing productivity, can pick up and gain new skills as they become necessary to remain competitively viable, and are able to expand their hiring pool with the confidence that they can overcome any skill gaps."²

In this research, a culture of learning is an organizational culture in which employees continuously seek, share, and apply new knowledge and skills to improve individual and organizational performance.

In 2016, researchers from the Association for Talent Development (ATD) found that organizations with learning cultures were far more likely to realize positive business results. However, that research also found most organizations lacked talent development practices that supported learning cultures.³

This report provides an updated look (from 2021) at these issues, delivers benchmarking data, and highlights best practices. It draws on a survey of talent development professionals from 304 organizations, of which 31 percent were performing well across several key business areas and had talent development functions that made strong contributions to that performance. The research identifies talent and culture practices with a statistically significant connection to high performance.

For example, one practice associated with success was having senior leaders publicly communicate that learning is important to organizational success; top executives play a key role in defining culture. At 20 percent of organizations, senior leaders voiced support for learning to a high or very high extent. These organizations were significantly more likely to be high performers. The study also found that direct manager involvement in learning was beneficial.

1. Forbes Technology Council, "15 Proven Methods for Developing a Culture of Learning in Your Tech Team," May 13, 2021, forbes.com/sites/forbestechcouncil/2021/05/13/15-proven-methods-for-developing-a-culture-of-learning-in-your-tech-team.
2. Derek Smith, "Creating a Learning Culture for a More Adaptable Organization," BizLibrary, June 15, 2020, bizlibrary.com/blog/organizational-culture/learning-culture-adaptable-organization.
3. Association for Talent Development (ATD), *Building a Culture of Learning: The Foundation of a Successful Organization* (Alexandria, VA: ATD Press, 2016).

Defining High Performers

This report compares the practices of high-performing organizations with those of all other organizations surveyed. In this report, high-performing organizations are those that met two criteria:

- They were performing as well as or better than their competitors in financial performance, customer and client satisfaction, employee engagement, and growth potential for the next five years.
- Their talent development functions helped them achieve their business goals to a high extent.

The research studies how senior leaders, managers, and talent development leadership can cultivate a culture of learning. It also looks at strategies associated with learning and business success and identifies the hallmarks of a talent development function that drives culture and results across organizations. In addition to looking at data from 304 companies, this report provides examples from successful organizations with thriving cultures of learning.

Whitepaper

This section shares key information about participants, including demographics, in the research. It also discusses the top barriers to building learning cultures that participants face. Finally, it shares key findings from the research.

About the Participants

ATD Research surveyed 304 talent development professionals about their organizations' culture and strategies. Of these, 57 percent were managers or above.

Just under a quarter of respondents (23 percent) represented small organizations with fewer than 500 employees, and 51 percent were from medium-sized organizations employing between 500 and 9,999 employees. The remaining 26 percent of respondents were from large organizations with 10,000 or more employees.

Among participating organizations, 31 percent were high performers. This distinction means they were performing well across several key business areas (financial performance, customer and client satisfaction, employee engagement, and growth potential for the next five years) and had talent development functions that made strong contributions to that performance. The remaining 69 percent did not meet these criteria.

Barriers to a Culture of Learning

To understand what challenges prevent organizations from building cultures of learning, the research asked participants to describe the barriers their organizations face in an optional, open-ended question. A large majority—261 in total—of participants answered. The top barrier was a lack of dedicated time for learning and sharing knowledge. Nearly half the participants (42 percent) who completed the open-ended question mentioned time constraints in their responses. Exemplifying the content and tone of these comments, one participant wrote, “Our employees are overworked and understaffed, so making time for professional development is more a dream than a reality.” Another who was employed at an organization where most employees worked in a call center environment said their workforce could “typically only come off the phone when the training is critical.” Healthcare and retail organizations also struggled because the nature of those jobs makes it difficult for employees to step away. In a later section, this report discusses how organizations can make time for learning and sharing.

Some other key barriers are named in following list. This report will address strategies for overcoming these barriers associated with performance:

- Senior leaders and managers not being supportive of or involved in learning
- Employees lacking interest in or awareness of development opportunities or failing to understand their importance
- A lack of resources for and skills on the talent development team

Key Findings

Key findings emerged from this research:

- At 20 percent of organizations, senior leaders communicated the importance of learning to a high or very high extent. These organizations were significantly more likely to be high performers, which underscores the importance of senior leader advocacy for learning.
- Organizations where managers encourage learning or support learning application and skill transfer to a high extent were much more likely to be high performers.
- The biggest barrier to a culture of learning was a lack of time for learning, according to respondents. However, organizations that supported employees by allowing them to use paid work time for learning were more likely to be high performers.
- Research shows that offering individual development plans (IDPs) is associated with better performance and offering IDPs to all employees has additional organizational benefits. The research found that 28 percent offered them for all employees (while another 41 percent offered them to only some employees). An IDP is a written plan that lays out the expected skills, knowledge, or capabilities that an individual employee will need to develop in a set time frame (such as during the next quarter or year).
- Successful organizations were more likely to engage in activities such as applying for public awards and partnering with other organizations such as nonprofits and government entities. They also recognized and rewarded their own employees who exhibit learning behaviors and sought to integrate learning into the hiring process.

Identifying Statistically Significant Differences

This report often notes whether the differences between two groups is significant at a level of $p < 0.05$. A significance of $p < 0.05$ implies a less than 5 percent probability that the difference is a result of chance, and one can be 95 percent confident that the results represent a statistically significant relationship.

Conclusion and Recommendations

A culture of learning is an organizational culture in which employees continuously seek, share, and apply new knowledge and skills to improve individual and organizational performance. This report looks at several talent and culture practices, identifies those that drive organizational excellence, and makes recommendations accordingly.

Top Executives Should Be Champions of a Culture of Learning

Organizations where senior leaders communicated the importance of learning to a high extent were significantly more likely to be high performers, and those where senior leaders failed to communicate the importance of learning had significantly lower odds of being high performers. Senior leaders can communicate the importance of learning in many ways; for example, they can publicly promote learning at all-staff meetings or in company-wide communications. But they should also be active participants in programs. “Leadership commitment starts at the top, with the active involvement of CEOs in such roles as leader-teachers, executive advisors, and mentors . . . the best leaders are insatiable learners who put a premium on well-developed cultures of learning,” writes Elaine Biech in *ATD’s Action Guide to Talent Development*. What happens when a CEO who supports a culture of learning leaves? Organizations should have a succession plan, and the successor should be aware of the importance of learning and how to champion it.

Involve Managers

Managers also need to be involved in supporting employees in their efforts to learn, apply, and share knowledge. One way in which managers support learning is by giving employees assignments where they can apply what they have learned—sometimes, these may be stretch assignments beyond the employee’s current job description. Managers can also ask employees to discuss and share their learning experiences with others on their team. When hiring new team members, managers should communicate the importance of learning and integrate questions about learning into the hiring process.

Personalize Development Plans and Show Learners the Value of Programs

High performers favor providing IDPs to all employees. These written plans give learners clear milestones and timelines in their learning journey, and they also assist the manager with supporting the employee’s learning. Organizations, however, should be careful not to

make the process of completing an IDP too burdensome, technically challenging, or complicated, warns David Hosmer in *TD*.⁴

Career paths and upskilling and reskilling programs are also favored by high performers. These programs are often tied to job promotion and opportunities, either at the company or in the larger job market. For example, upskilling and reskilling programs at Amazon and University Health help participants attain certifications that allow them to work in high-demand roles. Participants understand that the programs will help them boost their earning power. The benefit to the employer is greater retention and lowered recruiting costs.

Spread the Word

High performers promote learning opportunities and spread awareness. One practice particularly favored by high performers is making automated recommendations to learners (for example, recommending courses based on learners' job roles, past learning history, or other factors). This can be done with the help of AI. At IBM, the AI engine Watson tags learning opportunities and makes recommendations to learners. Another practice associated with high performance is promoting learning through social media. Social media publicizes learning opportunities and fosters a culture of learning by allowing employees to share knowledge and ask each other questions. Talent development teams may consider working with their organizations' technology, social media, and communications professionals to develop a plan for promoting learning.

Spreading the word doesn't just happen within the walls of the organization; organizations should seek opportunities to promote their learning culture publicly, such as by applying for awards related to learning or by partnering with foundations, nonprofits, educational institutions, or government entities.

Talent Development Teams Should Be Learners Too

The research found that, on average, high-performing organizations reported their talent development staff had higher proficiency across four areas—training delivery, instructional design, learning technology application, and evaluating learning impact—than lower-performing organizations. It also found that, on average, high-performing organizations frequently used a greater number of techniques and activities to make TD programs more engaging and drive learning transfer than lower-performing organizations. Finally, high performers have talent development teams that use evaluation data to constantly improve programs. Together, these findings suggest that talent development teams should model a culture of learning by constantly seeking opportunities for develop their own professional skills and opportunities to apply and experiment with new techniques and emerging technologies.

21. Hosmer, "Give New Life to IDPs."

About the Author and Contributors



The Association for Talent Development (ATD) is the world's largest professional membership organization supporting those who develop the knowledge and skills of employees, improve performance, and achieve results for the organizations they serve. Originally established in 1943, the association was previously known as the American Society for Training & Development (ASTD).

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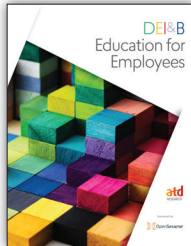
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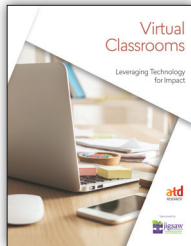
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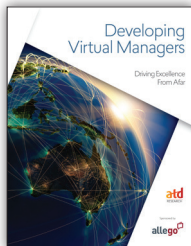
In recent years, many organizations have launched new diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging (DEI&B) initiatives and expanded existing ones to educate employees around DEI&B concepts, skills, and policies. This report uses statistical analysis to identify DEI&B education practices and policies linked to better DEI&B outcomes. It also provides key benchmarking data to help readers understand how other organizations are implementing and supporting their DEI&B education initiatives. For more information, visit [td.org/deib-report](https://www.td.org/deib-report)

Virtual Classrooms: Leveraging Technology for Impact



Virtual Classrooms: Leveraging Technology for Impact highlights how organizations design, develop, deliver, and support virtual classroom training. Based on a survey of talent development professionals, the report provides data-driven insights for helping talent development leaders optimize their approach for driving learning transfer before, during, and after virtual classroom training. It also examines best practices for adapting traditional classroom training to the virtual classroom. For more information, visit [td.org/VirtualClassroomsReport](https://www.td.org/VirtualClassroomsReport).

Developing Virtual Managers: Driving Excellence From Afar



Developing Virtual Managers: Driving Excellence From Afar examines how organizations develop their virtual managers, who are leading teams that include employees who work at different locations than they do. Based on a survey of talent development professionals, this report provides data-driven insights for helping leaders understand what separates managing in a virtual environment from managing in a traditional one, create talent development experiences and opportunities that cater to virtual managers' needs, and promote organizational policies that reinforce virtual manager effectiveness. For more information, visit [td.org/virtualmanagersreport](https://www.td.org/virtualmanagersreport).

2021 State of Healthcare Training



The *2021 State of Healthcare Training* examines the training activities of US healthcare organizations. Based on a survey of talent development professionals working in healthcare, the report provides data that will aid readers in benchmarking their own organizations' healthcare training expenditures and activities against those of other organizations. Additionally, it discusses how talent development professionals in healthcare have contributed to their organizations' COVID-19 responses and the talent strategies they are using to address issues related to the nursing shortage. For more information, visit [td.org/healthcarereport2021](https://www.td.org/healthcarereport2021).

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