

# calliope learning

## Learning Organizations Research Report



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## Executive Summary

Calliope Learning developed a 14 question online survey in December, 2002 about learning organizations and sent an invitation to the following Internet based discussion lists:

- Training and Development
- DEOS (Distance Education list)
- AEDNET (Adult education list)
- OSTD (Ontario Society for Training and Development)
- BAOL (British Association for Open Learning)

157 people completed the survey. The respondents, while representing some diversity, did fall into predictable categories, given that the invitations to participate were sent to mainly North American based training lists. While the respondents did represent a diversity of organizational positions, slightly more respondents were from large organizations in the educational sector versus the private sector in the United States.

Over two thirds of the respondents are striving to become learning organizations and over half of the organizations are attempting to assess themselves against learning organization ideals. Sixty-five percent are trying to tie the development of learning organization approaches to their business goals.

The adoption of specific tools does not seem to be happening as quickly as the adoption of the ideas. E-learning was utilized in over 70% of organizations.



# Learning Organizations Research Report

*In the long run, the only sustainable source of competitive advantage is your organization's ability to learn faster than its competition. Senge, 1990*

## Introduction

It has been almost 15 years since Senge's seminal work, *The Fifth Discipline*, has been published. In that time many academics have debated the veracity of his ideas<sup>1</sup> and practitioners have become inspired by his vision and eager to find practical strategies to apply in their organizations. Individual case studies<sup>2</sup> and Senge's own work in the 1999 *Fieldbook* point to the widespread adoption of these ideas, despite the criticism of some adult educators who are concerned about the corporate agenda overshadowing worker rights and needs. As Wonacott (2000) suggests,

*[Despite the] semi-religious hype...of utopian 'visionaries' ... the learning organization continues to exert a powerful, intuitive appeal and promise to organizations that must somehow find a way to learn their futures.*

We were interested in a broader perspective than the theoretical musings of academics and individual case studies of practitioners who were familiar with the concept. We wanted to find out how those in the training and development, e-learning, and human resources fields viewed the concept, and what kinds of things they were doing to implement and gauge their success as learning organizations.

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Fenwick's 1997 article, "Questioning the Learning Organization Concept" or Wonacott's 2000 article "The Learning Organization: Theory and Practice."

<sup>2</sup> See Ron Bleed's work at Maricopa for an example [ accessed March, 2003 <http://www.dist.maricopa.edu/users/bleed/learn.htm> ] or the individual research projects being sponsored by SOL (Society for Organizational Learning) [accessed March, 2003 <http://www.solonline.org/static/research/Memprojs.html> ]

## Learning Organizations: A Short Review

There are a number of commonly accepted definitions of learning organizations<sup>3</sup>:

*A learning organization is an organization that has an enhanced capacity to learn, adapt and change. Gephart et al., 1996*

*A learning organization is an organization skilled at creating, acquiring and transferring knowledge, and at modifying its behavior to reflect new knowledge and insights. Garvin, 1993*

*[Learning organizations are] organizations where people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people are continually learning how to learn together. Senge, 1990*

Systems thinking, personal mastery, mental models, building shared vision, and team learning, Senge's (1990) five disciplines, have become the dominant framework from which to consider the main characteristics of learning organizations in North America. As noted by many writers and a few respondents in our study, some of these disciplines are difficult to define and implement.

Other writers have proposed similar ideas to Senge, but are more practical in orientation. Garvin (1993), for example, suggests that there are five building blocks to a learning organization:

1. Systematic problem solving
2. Experimentation with new knowledge
3. Learning from experience
4. Learning from the experiences and best practices of others
5. Transferring knowledge quickly and efficiently throughout the organization

Pedlar et al. (1995) identified eleven characteristics of learning organizations:

1. A learning approach to strategy
2. Participative policy making
3. Information for learning at employee's fingertips
4. Formative accounting and control
5. Internal exchange of ideas and information
6. Rewards for flexibility
7. Enabling structures with supportive systems
8. Boundary workers as environmental scanners watching for change outside the organization
9. Inter-company learning
10. A learning climate
11. Self development opportunities for all

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<sup>3</sup> For a more extensive list of definitions, see the Canadian Centre for Management Development (CCMD) at [http://www.ccmd-ccg.gc.ca/lcd/2001/scorecard/score\\_page13\\_e.html](http://www.ccmd-ccg.gc.ca/lcd/2001/scorecard/score_page13_e.html) [accessed March, 2003]

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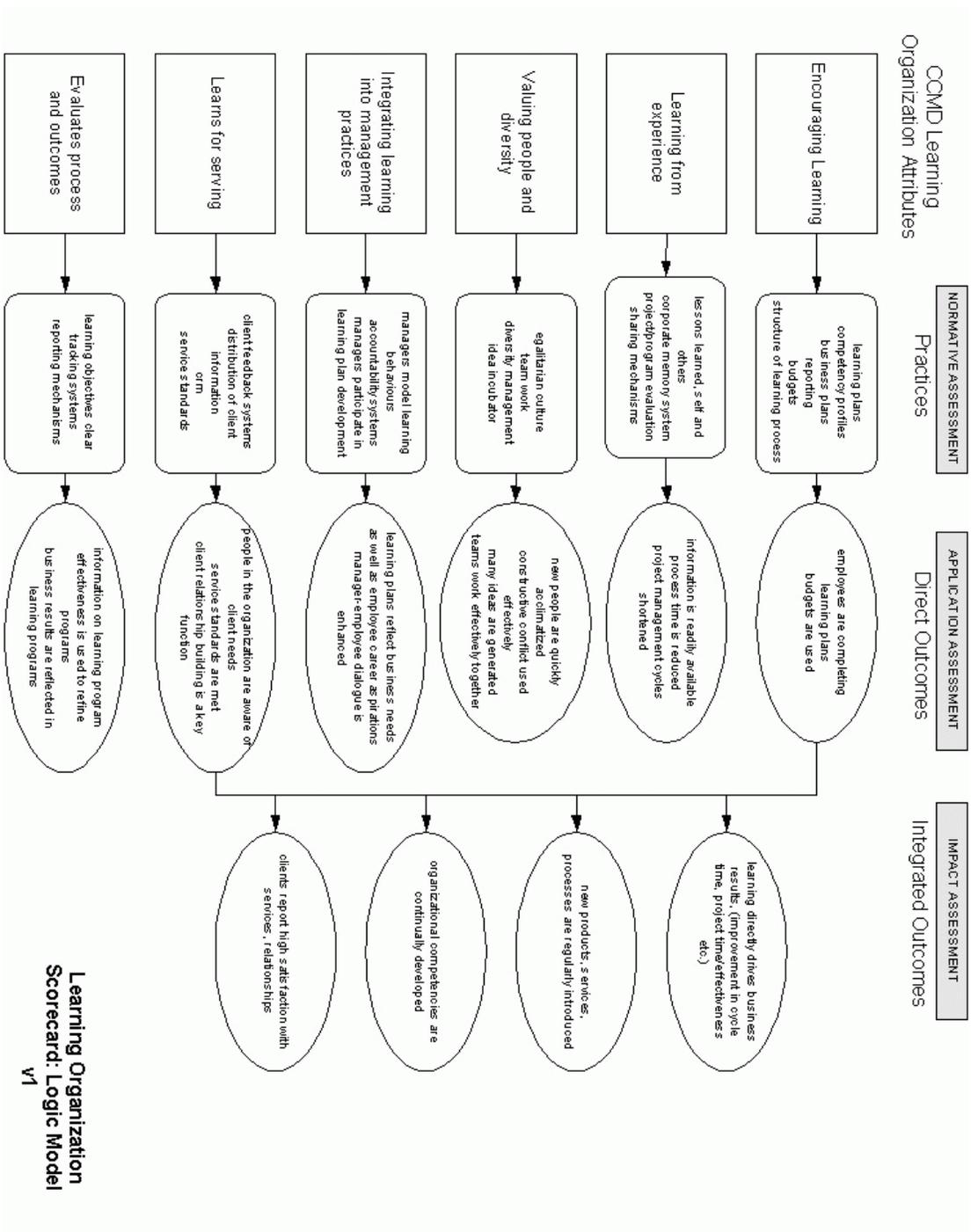
There are a few assessment tools available for measuring learning organizations. The Canadian Centre for Management Development (CCMD) reviewed the work of several researchers:

Figure 1 - Learning Organization Assessment Tools

Author/Tool	Content	Methodology
Watkins and Marsick <i>Dimensions of the Learning Organization Questionnaire</i>	Leadership, Structure, Systems, Communication, Technology	Self-assessment (i.e., organizational members assess the organization against the criteria). Likert scale format.
Pedler, Burgoyne, Boydell <i>Characteristics of a Learning Organization</i>	Leadership, Structure, Systems, Communication, Technology, Learning methods	Self-assessment. Likert scale or checklist format.
Dixon Organizational <i>Learning Competencies Survey</i>	Communication and Information systems	Self-assessment. Likert scale format.
Nevis, D iBella and Gould <i>Organizational Learning Inventory</i>	Team learning, vision/strategy/structure communication	Assessment by researchers. Likert scale format.
Richards and Goh <i>Learning Organization Survey</i>	Learning processes, mission/vision, processes, systems, leadership	Self-assessment. Likert scale format.

The CCMD studied the work of Richards and Goh (1995) and Tannebaum (1997) to inform the development of their own tool, the Learning Organization Scorecard. This is an intensive process carried out by either internal or external consultants “who would review organizational data and conduct interviews with key organizational members in order to respond to the questions contained within the Scorecard,” and “would follow accepted quality management practices such as the International Standards Organization (ISO).” See Figure 2:

Figure 2 - CCMD Learning Organization Scorecard



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Business Lab, a UK based research and consulting firm [ <http://www.businesslab.co.uk> ], analyzed the work of Farago and Skyrme(1995), Pedlar et al. (1997), Gephart et al., (1996), Garvin (1993), and Hill (no date), as a basis for their 2 year action research study with organizations in the UK. Based on the literature and their research, they developed a tool, the Learning Signature, which can be used to diagnose the characteristics of a learning organization in four major areas:

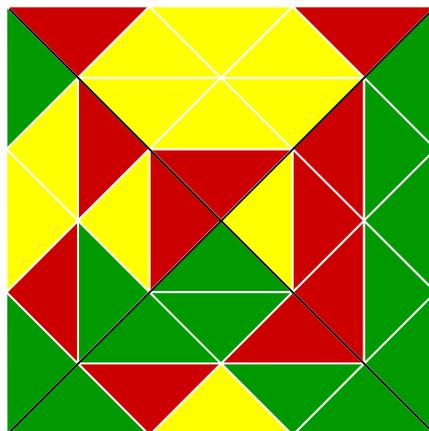
- Culture
- Environment
- Commitment
- Reach

Each of these four major areas contains 9 attributes which are coded according to whether that attribute is taking place (green), whether the attribute is unused or unconsidered (yellow), or whether there are barriers in that particular attribute (red). Specific attributes include:

- Culture – instinct, peer support, learning to learn, trust, communication, shared vision, openness, value, leadership
- Environment – atmosphere, technology, access, support, behavior, learning styles, infrastructure, sharing, design
- Commitment – strategy, risk, learning time, learning management, investment, reward, motivation, promotion, measurement
- Reach – inclusive, customers, wider community, partners, equality, suppliers, individuals, employees, delivery

Business Lab has gathered a range of case studies and studied the learning signature patterns. Part of interpreting a learning signature is to compare it against other patterns. The figure below represents a sample completed learning signature:

*Figure 3 - Sample completed Learning Signature*



## Methodology

A 14 question online survey (see Appendix A) was developed in December, 2002 and an invitation was sent out to the following Internet based discussion lists:

- Training and Development
- DEOS (Distance Education list)
- AEDNET (Adult education list)
- OSTD (Ontario Society for Training and Development)
- BAOL (British Association for Open Learning)

157 people completed the survey. Because the number of people subscribed to each list is unknown, we cannot identify a response rate.

Results were exported to Excel, where charts were developed for the statistical aspect of the survey. Open-ended questions were examined for themes.

We deliberately did not define “learning organizations” in our survey, as we wanted to find out how respondents conceptualized the term.

Fifty-one people indicated they would be willing to be interviewed; because of time constraints, they have not been contacted yet. A follow-up research study is being planned.

## Results

### Demographics

The respondents, while representing some diversity, did fall into predictable categories, given that the invitations to participate were sent to mainly North American based training lists. While the respondents did represent a diversity of positions, slightly more respondents were from large organizations in the educational sector versus the private sector in the United States. Additional details are contained in the following four charts, which detail position, sector, size and location.

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Figure 4 - Position

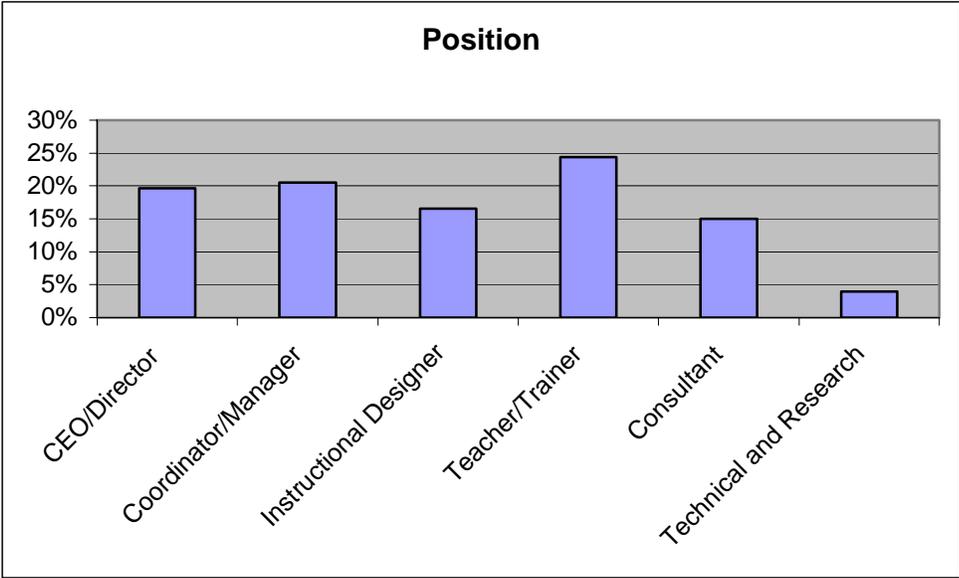


Figure 5 – Sector

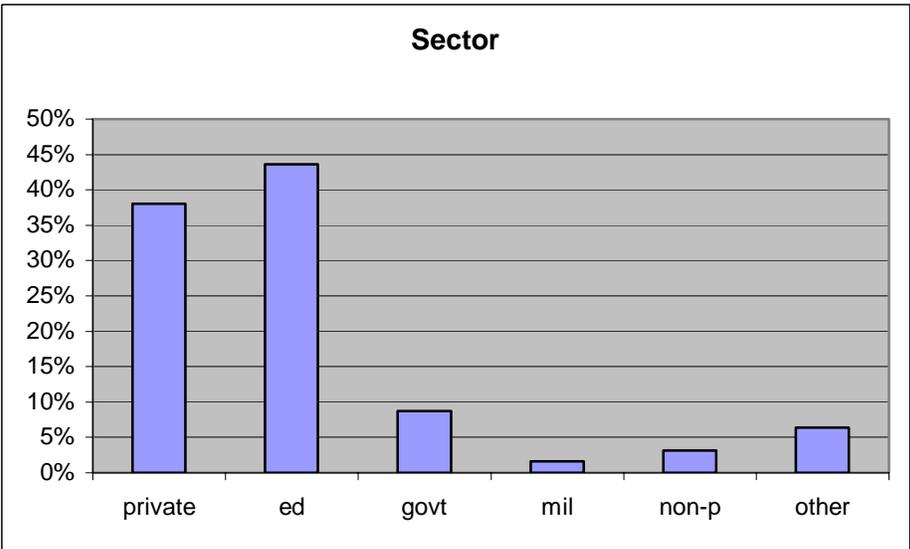


Figure 6 - Size of the Organization

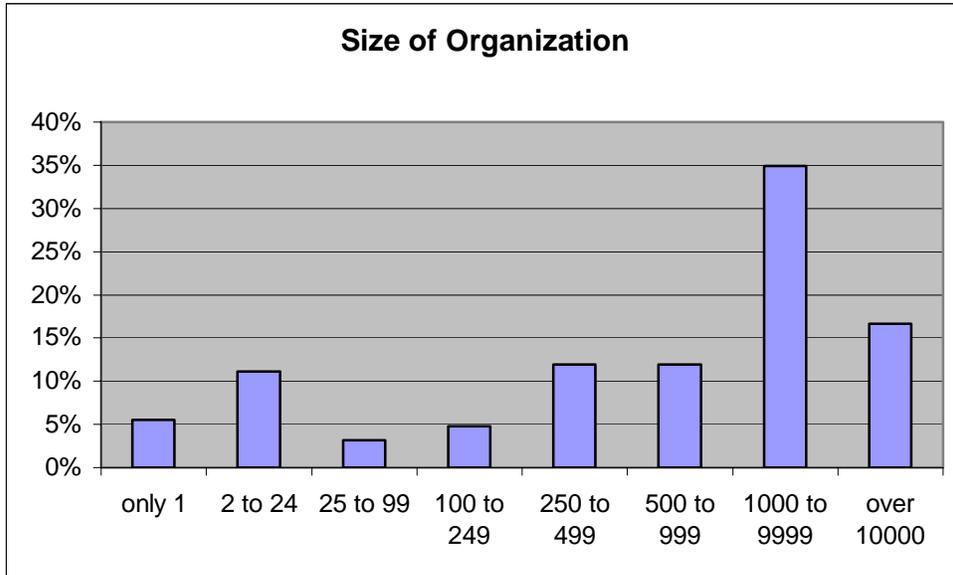
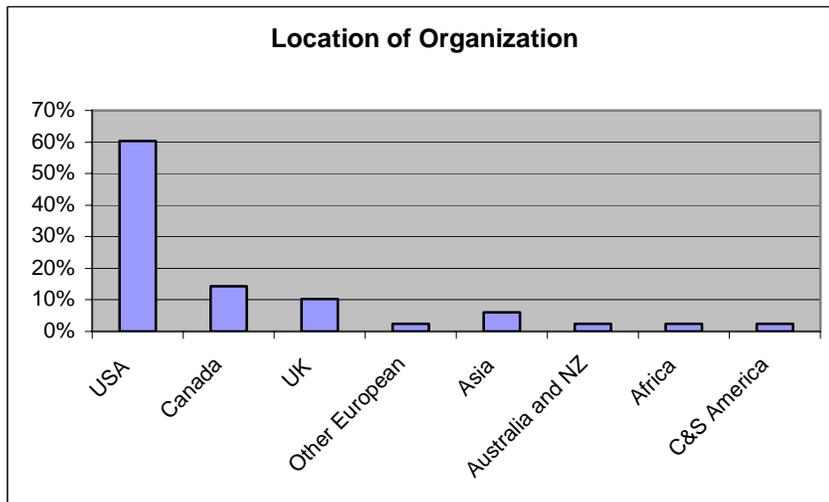


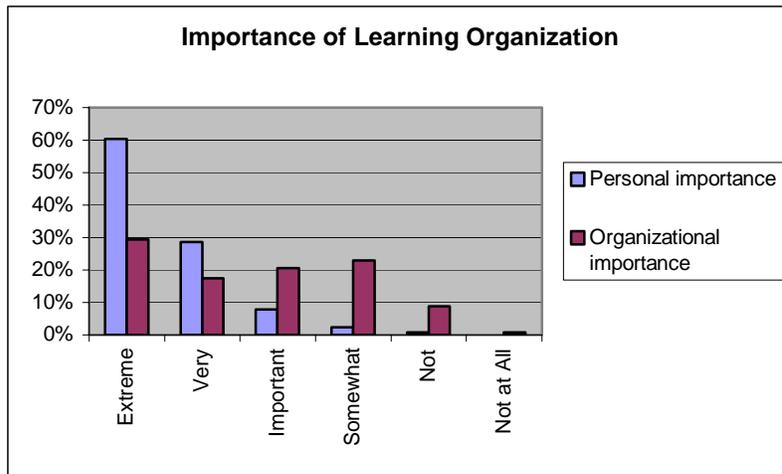
Figure 7 - Location of the Organization



## Importance of the Learning Organization Concept

Because of the debate about the importance of the learning organization concept itself, we posed two questions to examine respondents' views. We were not surprised to see that most respondents felt the concept was of more importance to them personally than to their organizations. See Figure 8.

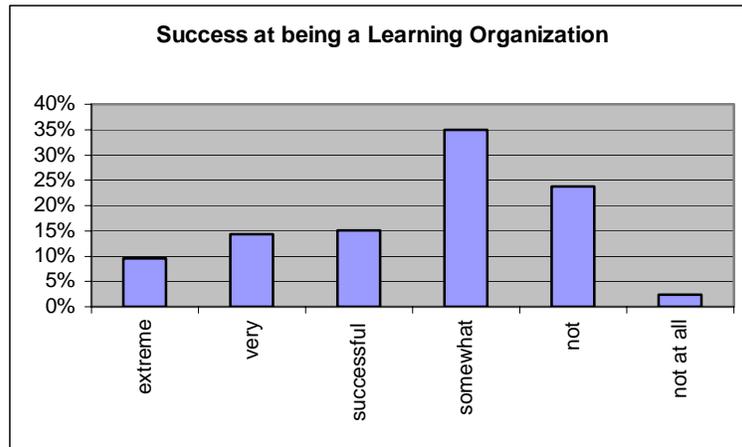
Figure 8 - Importance of Learning Organization Concept



## How successful is your organization at being a learning organization?

Given the views in the literature about how difficult learning organization concepts are to implement, we were not surprised to find out that the largest number of respondents thought their organizations were somewhat successful at being a learning organization. See Figure 9 below:

Figure 9 - Success at being a learning organization



Our analysis of why (or why not) respondents felt their organizations were successful revealed some intriguing perspectives on learning organizations.

Of the 12 who indicated they were extremely successful at being a learning organization, 3 were independent consultants and attributed their success to individual motivation and learning characteristics. The remaining 9 were in education (the majority were from the USA, and ranged in size from 24 to 10,000, representing a diversity of teachers, designers, researchers and management) and attributed success to things like “high educational standards”, “quality instructors and materials”, “ongoing research and classes”, a diverse number of courses offered, or high grade point averages. All of these factors point to a narrow conceptualization of learning organizations. Learning organizations are seen as offering many courses and testing and measurement of those courses. While these characteristics address a few of those noted by the authors who have developed assessment instruments, they are not comprehensive. One comment sums up this perspective quite well:

*Almost 10 percent of [university name] freshman class ranks in the top one-half of 1 percent in the nation in SAT and ACT scores. [University Name] ranks in the top five in the nation among all comprehensive public universities in National Merit Scholars enrolled per capita and in the graduation of Rhodes Scholars. [University Name] had 288 Sooner Scholars, or 64 percent of OU student athletes, who earned above a 3.0 cumulative grade point average last semester. Sixty of those students earned a perfect 4.0 grade point average.*

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Of the 17 who indicated they were very successful at being learning organizations, 16 were in education, and one was in the computer industry. The majority were from the USA. They were an even mix of teachers and management. Thirteen provided a response to this question.

The majority of responses pointed to factors like retention rates, assessment strategies or passing exams 100% of the time. One response, “*we are teachers*” is the most striking example of people interpreting “learning organizations” as “teaching,” again an example of the limited conceptualization of learning organizations. Three organizations moved beyond this narrow interpretation to note things like improvement of employee skills, involvement in jobs, sharing learning on the job, reviewing daily job processes for learning, and lower turnover.

Of the 18 who indicated they were successful at being a learning organization, seven were from the education sector, and the remaining were an even mix of consulting, manufacturing and medicine. There was an almost even mix of teachers/trainers and management, and, again, the majority were from the USA. Only two of these respondents equated learning organizations with good teaching or taking classes. The majority noted the importance of leadership support and staff buy-in to the importance of learning. Several noted that although commitment was there philosophically for being a learning organization, size and geographical diversity made things difficult to implement and change. Several also noted that time for learning was a factor in how successful they were. A few comments sum up this perspective:

*The level of success depends on the buy-in of each staff member. (Staff includes dept. chairs, supervisors, and first-line employee.) Some supervisors emphasize learning organizations more than others do.*

*This is a concept that has been implemented in the last 2 years of our 70-year history. We are still working our way through the integration of technology and the needs of the organization.*

As noted previously, many of the respondents (43 in total) rated their organizations as somewhat successful. Those in education represented the largest number (13), with an even mix of banking, computer, government and industry. There was an even mix of teachers/trainers, instructional designers, and management, and the majority of respondents were from organizations of 1000 or more in the USA. This group of respondents provided the most insight into the characteristics of learning organizations and a more indepth understanding of the concept. Every quadrant of Business Lab’s model, for example – culture, environment, commitment and reach – were addressed, and implicit in their responses was an understanding of the issues that must be addressed when an organization shifts from a training or teaching culture to that of a learning culture. The following comments demonstrate this:

*The culture of our workplace must adapt so that informal learning becomes just as prominent and valued as formal learning.*

*Becoming a learning organization is something that is talked about but there is no general agreement about the definition or what this actually looks like for the organization - what changes? How can this be measured?*

*There is still a real mental block at the top. We facilitate students to understand what learning is and how it can assist organisational development and competitiveness. However, we do not 'walk the talk' in our own organisation.*

Twenty-nine rated their organizations as not successful. The majority of respondents were management, followed by teachers or trainers. There was an almost even mix of those from education and those from government, and an almost even mix of organizations under 1000 and over 1000. This group of responses was very similar to the previous set, showing a more in-depth understanding of learning organizations, and addressing each of the quadrants of Business Lab's model. The following comments sum up:

*There isn't wholesale buy-in or indeed understanding as to what the learning organisation looks like. It is easier to target aspects such as e-Learning.*

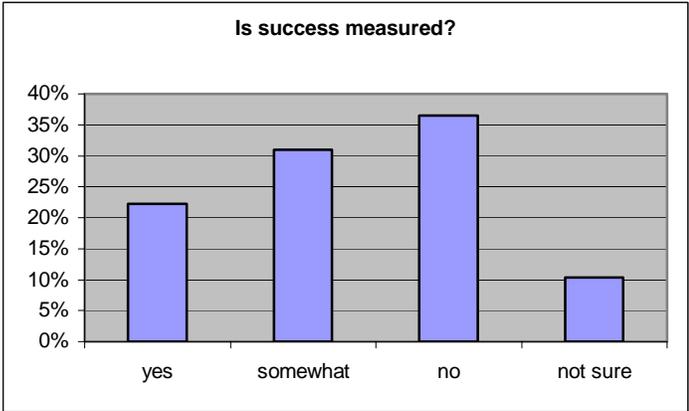
*There is little effort to promote organizational intelligence. Expertise is often not shared, nor is learning by individuals captured so it can be available to all and contribute to the overall organization.*

Only 3 respondents suggested that their organizations were not successful at all as learning organizations. These three were from large organizations, 2 in the USA and one in Thailand. Their responses pointed to the concept being newly introduced and cultural issues. As one person from the USA noted, "We're only just now beginning to think about becoming a learning organization. It will happen, but right now it's in the infancy stage." The comment made from the person in Thailand is quite interesting:

*1. Lack of management commitment and support, which results in No. 2 below. 2. Employee apathy and mistrust 3. Cultural unfamiliarity--Can this Western concept be adapted to suit the Asian frame of reference in the workplace and in social relationships? (strict hierarchies of authority, greater concern with 'loss of face' when superiors 'descend' to interrelate with subordinates on any topic or task)*

We also asked respondents if they measured this success, and the majority of the respondents said somewhat or no. While there are a few assessment tools out there, it appears that the majority of our respondents are not aware of them and/or not able to utilize them. See Figure 10.

Figure 10 - Is Success Measured?



**Learning Organization Books, Tools, and Processes**

Given that a number of people have written about learning organizations, we were curious as to the kinds of books, tools or processes that informed the views of the respondents. Perhaps because of the phrasing of the open-ended question (or perhaps because of the “training” vs “learning” mental model that appeared to characterize a number of responses), people interpreted this question to mean generic books, tools and processes; the majority of respondents listed the type of training they had in their organizations. A smaller group mentioned various initiatives related to performance reviews, balanced scorecard approaches, quality assurance initiatives, knowledge management systems, and technology enhanced training programs. Of those who mentioned anything specific to learning organization concepts, thirteen referred to Senge’s ideas specifically.

We also asked if these books, tools or processes were linked to overall business strategy. See Figure11:

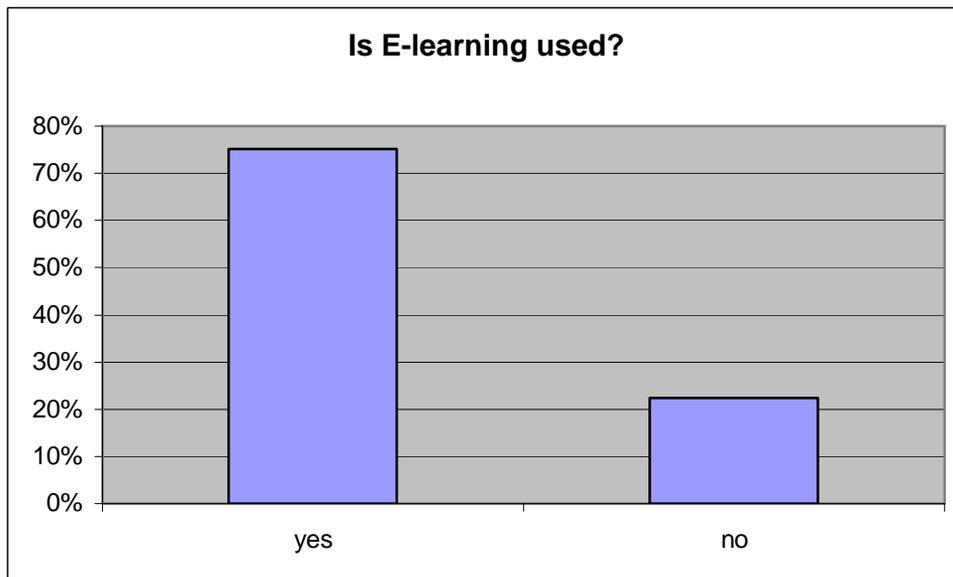
Figure 11 - Link to business strategy



### The Use of E-Learning

Given the boom of e-learning in the past few years (Cross, 2003), we wanted to find out how many organizations were using e-learning. See Figure 12

Figure 12 - E-learning



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## Conclusions

This research set out to poll a range of organizations about their attitudes and practices about learning organizations. Looking at the demographic information that was collected, it would be fair to say that a wide range of North American organizations are represented in this research and that the responses from outside of North America do not differ in any significant way (other than for the comment about Asian businesses adopting less hierarchical approaches being counter cultural).

It's clear that many organizations (over two thirds of the respondents) are indeed striving to become learning organizations and that Senge's (1990) words:

*In the long run, the only sustainable source of competitive advantage is your organization's ability to learn faster than its competition.*

... are being taken seriously. Over half the organizations that are represented in this research are attempting to assess themselves against learning organization ideals and 65% are trying to tie the development of learning organization approaches to their business goals. Fifty-one people volunteered to be interviewed about their perspectives, another indication of how interested people are in these ideas.

It's interesting to note that there seems to be correlation between how well an organization rates itself and the narrowness of their interpretation of learning organizations. Many educational institutions rate themselves very highly, but at the same time focus mainly on the testing and measurement of learning in formal classroom settings (and teaching) and less so on other aspects such as organizational culture and reaching out to the extended enterprise. The exceptions here are smaller consultancies, where the culture of the organization is in the hands of a few individuals.

The adoption of specific tools does not seem to be happening as quickly as the adoption of the ideas. This may be down to the relative infancy of the tools. Time will tell, and further research in this area to look at the reasons why the ideas but not the tools are being adopted would be worthwhile.

Finally, it was interesting to see that e-learning formed an important part of many organizations learning strategies. So the e-learning bubble may have burst (Cross, 2003)... but that doesn't mean that organizations aren't making use of their technological infrastructure. Once again, more research looking at how e-learning is being used to promote the learning organization goals, would be fascinating.

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## Appendix A

### Learning Organizations and E-Learning

This survey about learning organizations and e-learning is being conducted by Tammy Dewar of Calliope Learning. If you have any questions about it or problems completing the survey, please email her at [tammy@calliopelearning.com](mailto:tammy@calliopelearning.com)

Thank you for taking the time to share your perspectives.

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1) What is your job title?

If you selected other please specify:

2) Please select an industry

3) How many employees are employed in your entire company, including all plants, divisions, branches and subsidiaries?

4) Where are you located?

If you selected other please specify:

5) How important is being a learning organization to you personally?

Extremely Important  
Very Important  
Important  
Somewhat Important  
Not Very Important  
Not Important At All

6) How important is being a learning organization to your organization?

Extremely Important  
Very Important  
Important  
Somewhat Important  
Not Very Important  
Not Important At All

7) How successful is your organization at being a learning organization?

Extremely Successful  
Very Successful  
Successful  
Somewhat Successful  
Not Very Successful  
Not Successful At All

8) Why or why not?

9) Is this success (or lack of) measured?

- Yes
- No
- Somewhat
- Not Sure

Additional comments:

10) What learning organization books, tools or processes are used in your organization?

11) Are these books, tools or processes linked to overall business strategy?

- Yes
- No
- Somewhat
- Question Not Applicable

12) As part of your overall learning organization strategy, are you using any form of e-learning?

- Yes
- No

If yes, please specify:

13) If you are willing to be interviewed about this survey topic of learning organizations, please indicate so by providing your name, email address and phone number in the text box below.

14) If you would like a copy of the results of this survey, please indicate so by providing your email address in the text box below.

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Thanks for taking the time to complete this survey.