

DOUG HARWARD KEN TAYLOR

**WHAT MAKES
A GREAT
TRAINING
ORGANIZATION?**

A HANDBOOK OF
BEST PRACTICES

What Makes a Great Training Organization?

A Handbook of Best Practices

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This book is dedicated to all of those training professionals who work tirelessly to make sure they provide the type of training and development programs that truly impact the lives of the learners, while ultimately transforming the performance of their business.

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Introduction: Why We Wrote This Book

In 2007, we sought to understand the criteria organizations used when doling out awards to training organizations for the work they do. We found out there was little depth to the criteria, and there wasn't any deep understanding of what practices are actually important in making a training organization exceptional, or *great* (an important distinction). We sought a better understanding. So we did our first study of what capabilities and practices training organizations employ in order to perform at a very high level.

What we found is that there are groups of processes, or practices, that when done well, drive sustainable impact and make a significant difference in the performance of a business. We call these groups of practices *capabilities*. Our research showed that virtually all training organizations have some level of expertise in eight capability areas. Training organizations that excel in some of these capability areas are considered to be high performing. And those that excel in many of the practices among the eight capability areas are considered to be performing at what we consider a *great* level.

Some companies, such as suppliers, monetize these capabilities. Others employ them in running training for their own constituents. We sought to understand and codify the “best practices” associated with each capability area. We spent several years on this, revising our data each year, and we believe we now have a very good understanding of what the best practices are around the core capability areas for running a training organization. Then we had the idea of writing this

book to educate individuals about what the practices are and to show how training managers can use these practices in their everyday work life.

We were often asked a seemingly simple question in our discussions with learning leaders: “I know we have to make some changes, but where should we start?” The need for this book became more real as we started to understand that there was no blueprint or roadmap to help leaders understand what the collective body of corporate learning experts—and those actually doing the role—felt were the activities or practices required to make an organization great at supporting learning. As business-focused professionals, our goal was to shorten the learning curve, to tap the collective wisdom to help the next generation of learning leaders skip some of the trial and error, and go right to implementation of practices that will change the impact of their organization. We felt that we needed to both rank the impact or importance of the practices of great training organizations and also group these practices around the known processes found in almost all corporate training environments.

In our research, we were able to look at the market from several perspectives, including job roles/constituents, companies of all sizes, and companies from multiple industry segments. Our study represents all of the market.

The Demographics of the Research Pool

Our report included the opinions of 1,609 learning professionals, collected through online surveys. A 2008 study elicited 462 respondents, and a 2009 study elicited 364. In 2010, 183 learning leaders contributed to the study, and an additional 221 and 192 took part in 2011 and 2012, respectively. Finally, in 2013, 187 learning leaders

responded to the survey. Throughout the entire cycle, we continuously validated the results through hundreds of discussions with both the supply-side companies and corporate learning leaders throughout the industry.

Respondents were learning professionals who represent or run three basic types of organizations:

- **Corporate training departments**—These organizations train those who work for, or with, their own organizations (e.g., employees, channel partners, contractors) or customers of their organizations' non-training-related products. They may also buy training products or services from training companies or providers.
- **Training companies/providers**—These organizations train external client organizations (e.g., corporate training departments) or individuals to whom they sell training-related products or services, which may also include consulting. This group also includes some nonprofits, and other organizations, such as membership and trade associations, which offer training to external parties.
- **Educational institutions**—This group includes universities or colleges that provide education to their students and others who cannot be classified into the two main categories above.

The sizes of the organizations represented in our study are displayed in Figure I-1. The varied sizes of the organizations demonstrate that the best practices addressed in the book represent all of the industry, not just big companies.

While training and development, technology, and banking/finance were the top 3 industries represented, respondents from corporate training departments spanned more than 20 industries, as shown in Figure I-2.

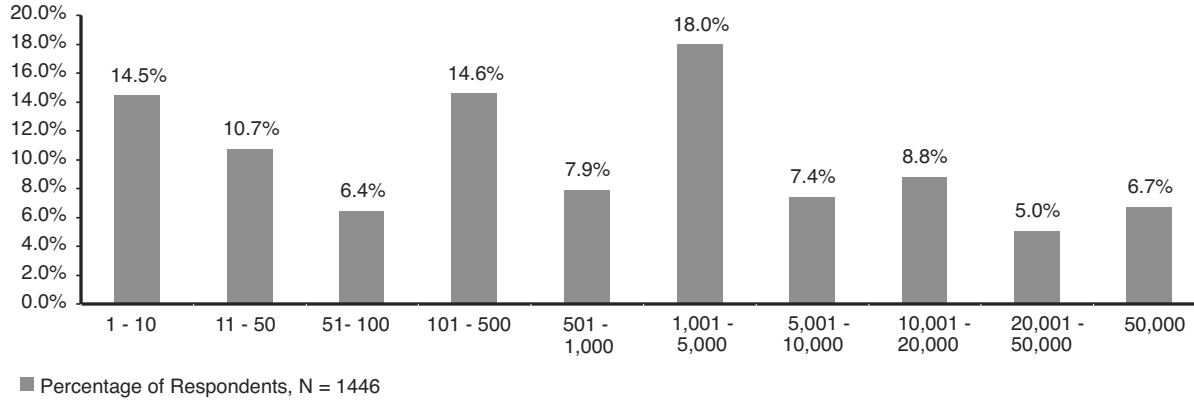


Figure I-1 Sizes of Companies, Represented by Number of Employees, 2008–2013

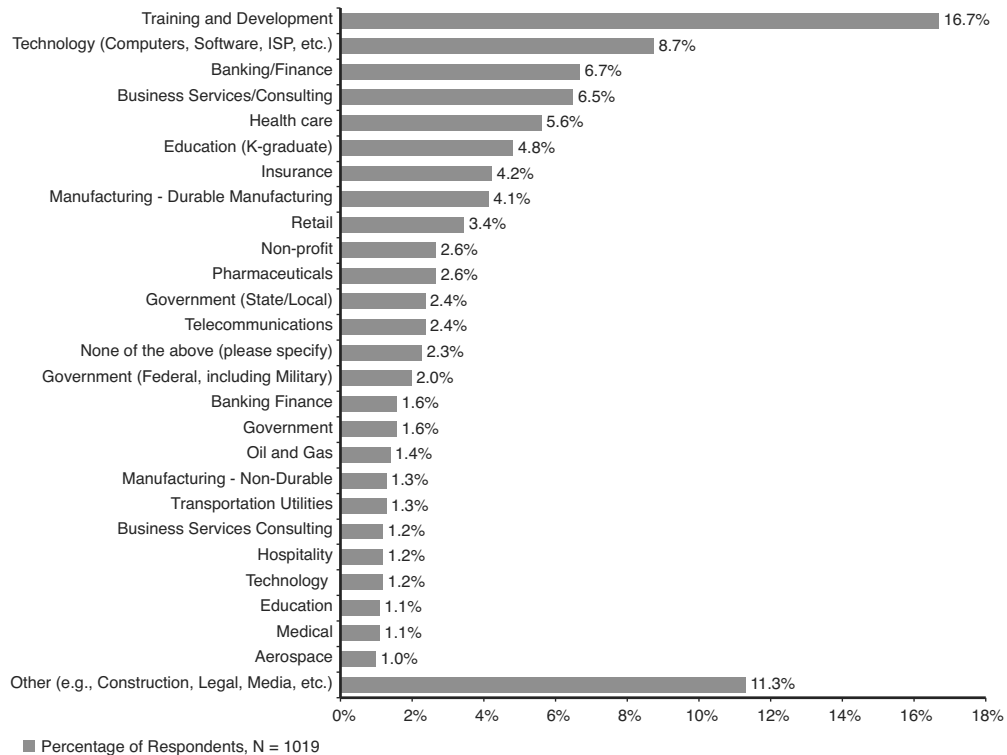


Figure I-2 Industries Represented, 2009–2013

This book explores the capabilities and best practices associated with each capability, as defined by our report. We frequently informally mention people who provided input throughout the research; to protect their privacy, we do not name them or their companies. Where we can, however, we do provide their names and companies. All the data and information presented in this book come from real companies doing real training. The goal of this book is to provide you with some ideas—a starting point to help you transform your organization—that we feel play critical roles in the long-term success of any company. Remember that as the custodian of the significant investment your company makes in the development of its people, you are responsible for maximizing the impact of that investment. The following chapters offer a set of practical strategies, tools, and practices that can help you with that challenge. We spend almost every day at the heart of the training industry. We look forward to your feedback, as we will continue to track, adjust, and share our understanding of what makes a great training organization.

1

The Eight Process Capability Areas of a Training Organization

Leaders of high-performing training organizations understand that achieving the level of excellence that their clients expect requires a strong commitment to process. Our research tells us that focus on process is not enough on its own; success depends on demonstration of process—or an organization’s ability to perform that process at a high level. When we began our research, the fundamental question we wanted to answer was, “What practices are associated with the capabilities that, when performed at a very high level, make a training organization *great*?”

We surveyed learning leaders from a variety of industries all over the world to determine which process capabilities are the most important. While contributing their valuable opinions to identify the most critical process capabilities, these leaders also told us the practices that propel training organizations through the transformation from *good* to *great*. Learning leaders then rated how well their own training organizations perform each process capability to confirm which processes are truly *critical* and to pinpoint potential areas for improvement.

The Eight Key Process Capabilities

When we asked learning leaders to rate which process capabilities were important in a great training organization, eight capabilities emerged as being most critical. We developed the cited practices through discussion with the research participants and other learning leaders into the following eight key process capabilities areas:

- **Strategic alignment**—Ability to design learning programs that align with business objectives.
- **Content development**—Assessment, design, management, and maintenance of content.
- **Delivery**—Ability to manage an instructor network and deliver training using multiple modalities.
- **Diagnostics**—Ability to identify causes of problems and make recommendations.
- **Reporting and analysis**—Ability to define business metrics and report data to make improvements.
- **Technology integration**—Ability to integrate learning technologies with other learning technologies or other corporate applications.
- **Administrative services**—Ability to manage scheduling, registration, technology, and other back office support functions.
- **Portfolio management**—Ability to manage, rationalize, and maintain large portfolios of learning solutions.

The greatest number of respondents (79%) rated strategic alignment as critical, and the second largest number of respondents (55%) said content development is critical. Figure 1-1 shows the percentage of respondents who rated each process capability as critical for great training organizations.

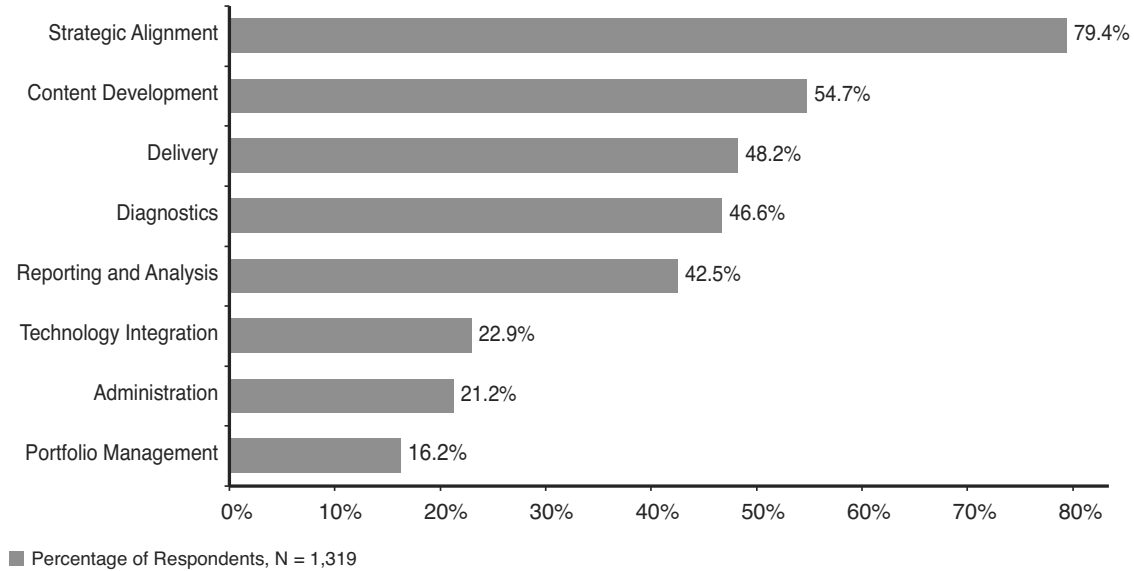


Figure 1-1 Percentage of Respondents Rating Each Process Capability as Critical for a Great Training Organization

Although Figure 1-1 demonstrates the need for great training organizations to possess many of the process capabilities listed, some capabilities are clearly considered more critical than others. When we asked learning leaders to specify which process capability is most critical for a great training organization, an overwhelming 59% reiterated the importance of strategic alignment, as shown in Figure 1-2.

Learning leaders provided us with a very clear picture of where to start in improving the impact of a training organization. The old adage “if the program isn’t aligned with the goals of the business, then it’s probably not going to generate the type of impact it should” rings clear in the results of the survey.

We explore each of these process capabilities further in other chapters.

Organization Ratings

We asked learning leaders to rate their own training organizations’ proficiency for each process capability area, using the scale “don’t do,” “poor,” “average,” “good,” and “great.” Figure 1-3 shows the percentage of respondents who rated their own training organization as great for each process capability.

We found it interesting that learning leaders reported that their own training organizations excelled at the three most critical process capabilities, as outlined in Figure 1-2: strategic alignment, content development, and delivery. In addition, few learning leaders (no more than 27.5%) rated their organizations as great in any of the process capability areas. This information leads us to believe that there are a large number of organizations ready for ideas to help them move their organization along toward greatness.

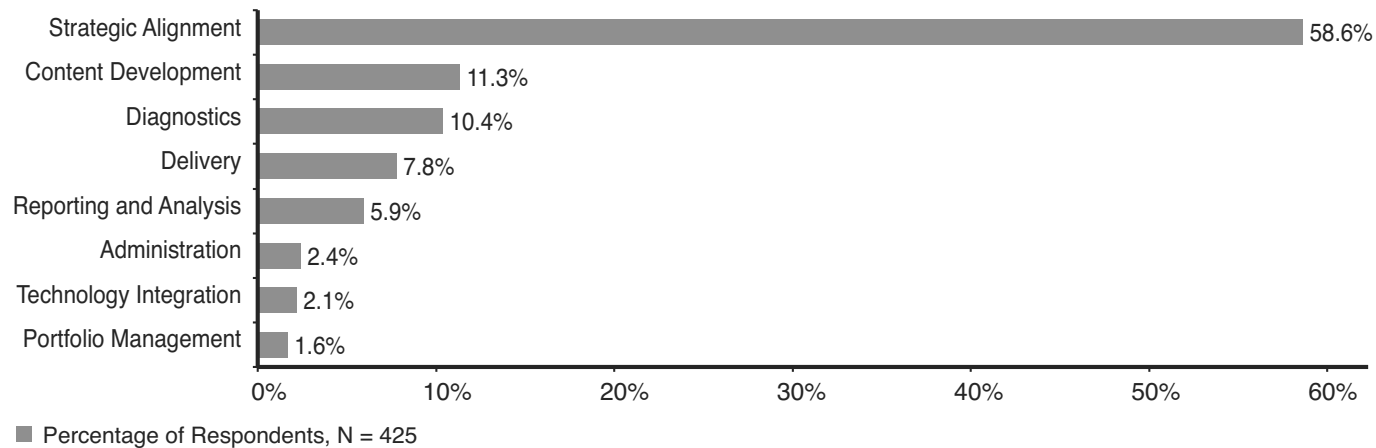


Figure 1-2 The Most Critical Process Capabilities for a Great Training Organization

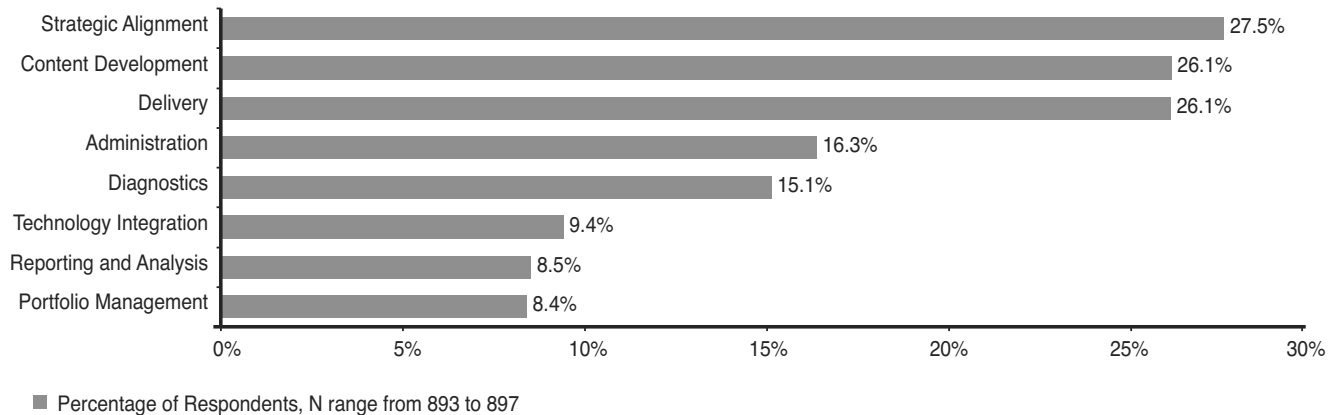


Figure 1-3 Respondents Rating Their Training Organization as Great for Each Process Capability

Understanding process capabilities is the first and most integral step in determining what is important to continually improving the operations of a training organization. Many articles, books, and other available materials suggest innovative ideas for how to run a training organization. Some suggest that you run your organization like a business. Others suggest that you should evolve from an academic approach to a business approach to training. All surely have merit and are important to consider when determining what is important in running a high-performing training organization. But we believe the research suggests that the best path is to fundamentally understand the process capabilities that are critical in great training organizations and then work to implement those practices that have been identified by hundreds of training leaders around the globe.

We suggest that you determine where your organization is related to each practice within the various capability areas and define priorities for the practices that are most important to your organization, based on corporate goals and objectives. Although hundreds of professionals told us their opinions and helped us identify the priorities for a large number of organizations, what is more important is that you determine what is important for *your* organization. After you do that, you can develop a plan for how to make your organization a great, high-performing training organization.

Please recognize that the process capabilities and practices are *not* mutually exclusive. That is, you can implement any and all of them at the same time, or at various times, depending on your business's objectives. It's up to you. What works for one organization may not be best in another. You are the best judge of what your strategy should be. We just suggest that you take a path and begin your journey to becoming a great training organization.

Conclusion

The chapters that follow explore the process capabilities and practices that define a great training organization. Strategic alignment, which aligns training programs with the business needs and goals of a company, is consistently considered the most crucial process capability for training organizations to master. By using the best practices that learning leaders identified to excel at strategic alignment, as well as the best practices for the other process capabilities, a training organization can improve performance and become a *great training organization that contributes value to the business*.

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