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CHAPTER 2

THE TOPICALITY OF
THE LEARNING
ORGANIZATION: IS THE
CONCEPT STILL
RELEVANT TODAY?

SIU LOON HOE

INTRODUCTION

FOR any organization to stay competitive, there is a need to continually learn and adapt to changes in the market environment. Many management ideas and tools have been developed to address this challenge. One such concept is the learning organization described in *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization*, by Peter Senge (1990). The learning organization seeks to harness the power of groups of individuals to solve complex problems using systems thinking, that is, bringing together different parts of the organization to see things as a whole for growth.

Almost three decades have passed since the origination of the concept. Thus, two pertinent questions raised here are, “What is the current level of interest in the learning organization concept?” and “Is the concept still relevant today?” In order to evaluate the topicality and usefulness of the learning organization concept from different perspectives and minimize subjectivity in the discussion, a triangulation research method was adopted (Heale and Forbes 2013). The chapter includes a review of authors who have recently and explicitly commented on the topicality of the learning organization, a qualitative content analysis of recent journal publications on learning organizations justifying the need for the concept, and quantitative research using print media indicators and Google Trends to identify the number of publications related to learning organization among scientific and casual researchers over time.

The purpose of this chapter is to investigate the level of interest in the learning organization and its usefulness at the present time, taken to be circa 2018. The main sections of the chapter are: an overview on the state of the learning organization and explicit views on its topicality offered by authors recently; a review of justifications used in recent publications on the need for the learning organization; an examination of the current level of interest based on bibliographic databases and Google Trends searches for the keyword “learning organization”; a discussion in response to the two questions raised; and finally, a discussion of the limitations of the study and suggestions for further research.

THE STATE OF THE LEARNING ORGANIZATION CONCEPT

The learning organization concept was popularized by Senge (1990). It is associated with five key disciplines or characteristics, namely, personal mastery, mental models, shared vision, team learning, and systems thinking. Over the years, the concept has evolved and been further developed by many researchers and practitioners (Garvin, Edmondson, and Gino 2008; Marquardt 2011; Marsick and Watkins 2003; Örténblad 2018). However, not all of these developments follow Senge’s (1990) version of the learning organization. For example, research questionnaires such as the *Dimensions of a Learning Organization Questionnaire* (DLOQ) (Yang, Watkins, and Marsick 2004) and the *Learning Organization Survey* (LOS) (Garvin et al. 2008) measure different attributes of a learning organization beyond the five disciplines. Many other learning organization studies related to management topics such as innovation and leadership have also been conducted (Allouzi, Suifan, and Alnuaimi 2018; Delić, Slåtten, Milić, Marjanović, and Vulanović 2017).

Recently, several authors have explicitly commented on the topicality of the learning organization (Adžić 2018; Grieves 2008; Pedler and Burgoyne 2017; Vince 2018). Their arguments provided some insights on the usefulness of the concept today. Adžić (2018) mentioned that the learning organization is an example of a management fad with low practical value. The evidence provided includes the failure of British car producer, Rover, used as a prime example of a learning organization, and falling interest in the topic based on a bibliographic database. The arguments presented were that the learning organization is a post-industrial innovation which warrants a change in mindset towards cooperation and flexibility against a backdrop of poor competitiveness, skills, and industrial relations. Despite the misgivings, the author supported the idea of learning in organizations and the importance of organizational learning and knowledge management to achieve better performance. In an attempt to provoke a debate, Grieves (2008) had earlier said that the learning organization ideal should come to a natural end. Its usefulness is questioned due to the subjectivity of its construct and its measurement. In addition, there seemed to be a lack of certainty in systems thinking to influence

outcomes and the other four disciplines merely provide a general structure as part of the learning organization narrative. The example of Siemens, a German conglomerate, was highlighted to demonstrate the difficulties in identifying and implementing a learning organization. The other shortcomings of the concept include overlooking humanistic values and ethical code of practice.

Vince (2018) proposed framing the learning organization as a paradox to ensure its continuing relevance. The idea of dualism suggests that the concept incorporates both positive and negative developmental influences that shape an organization. An example of positive influence is enhancing culture while a negative influence is exclusion of reflection. With the recognition that tensions would always be involved in the organization of learning, one would then acknowledge that the learning organization concept is always relevant in pursuit of growth, innovation, and change. Pedler and Burgoyne (2017) suggested that the changing nature of work, an emphasis on performance over learning, and the operation of the concept under different names render a clear response to the question on whether the learning organization is still alive difficult. Their sample study yielded mixed results from both proponents and opponents of the concept. The former viewed the learning organization as being of interest in some quarters and as a background assumption operating under different labels. The latter thought otherwise and said that the concept was less frequently mentioned recently.

In summing up the views from the critics and advocates on the usefulness of the learning organization today, both sides acknowledge the relevance of learning in organizations to improve performance but significant enhancements to the concept are required. Some of these enhancements include a more objective approach to construct development and scale measurement, incorporating other dimensions to the concept, and taking into consideration the effect of an evolving work environment.

THE NEED FOR LEARNING ORGANIZATION

Qualitative content analysis is a research method used to analyze text data such as articles and books (Kondracki, Wellman, and Amundson 2002). The analysis involves comparisons of content followed by the interpretation of the underlying context (Hsieh and Shannon 2005). A qualitative content analysis was conducted on the views of authors who have recently published on the topic of the learning organization and provided justifications of the need for the concept. The purpose was to understand its perceived usefulness among researchers and practitioners today.

In order to take into consideration the evolution of the concept including the different definitions, views, and interpretations, the research methodology involved complying with a “narrower” scope for the “term” or label while accepting a “broader” scope for the “content” of the learning organization. The keyword search was limited to simply, “learning organization.” Related topics such as “organizational learning” and “knowledge management” were deliberately excluded to avoid any ambiguity and possible overlaps

associated with the concept. However, the “content” included subtopics such as DLOQ and LOS that are beyond the five disciplines mentioned earlier. The main advantage of this methodology is staying faithful to the initial conception of the idea but the downside is that it ignores the many enhancements that have been added to the model over the years (Örtenblad 2007).

Using a keyword search for “learning organization,” a total of ninety-eight documents was returned in Scopus for the period between January and end September 2018. Scopus is an abstract and citation database of peer-reviewed literature that covers scientific journals, books, and conference proceedings. Of these documents, seventy-eight were journal articles, nine were conference proceedings, four were book chapters, and seven were others. After reviewing the contents based on relevance to the learning organization concept, the final sample size consisted of twenty-four journal articles (see Table 2.1).

With regard to the justifications provided by the various authors on the need for learning organization in the studies, ten were related to building an organizational culture. Among these, six were connected to employee development such as commitment, shared aims, empowerment, involvement, and engagement (Chai and Dirani 2018; Karve and Aggarwal-Gupta 2018; Liu and Liu 2018; Melhem 2018; Ravichandran and Mishra 2018; Song, Chai, Kim, and Bae 2018). Another four were linked to better care delivery in the healthcare environment (Gelmon, Bouranis, Sandberg, and Petchel 2018; He and Chen 2018; Mirza et al. 2018; Westergren et al. 2018).

There were five studies that articulated improving performance as a reason for the learning organization (Boshier 2018; Gouthro, Taber, and Brazil 2018; Khunsoonthornkit and Panjakajornsak 2018; Siddique 2018; Ward, Berensen, and Daniels 2018). These performance outcomes were associated with competitive advantage, reduced public funding, organizational commitment, revenue growth, and work goals.

Four studies used developing innovation capacity as the rationale for the learning organization (Gil, Rodrigo-Moya, and Morcillo-Bellido 2018; Hamdani and Susilawati 2018; Janežiča, Dimovskia, and Hodoščekb 2018; Syam, Akib, Patonangi, and Guntur 2018). These innovations could be either product- or service-based. Three studies were related to the need for knowledge sharing as part of the learning organization (Borge, Filstad, Olsen, and Skogmo 2018; Othman and Elsaay 2018; Ricciardelli, Manfredi, and Antonicelli 2018). Such knowledge-based activities could lead to better problem solving and improved decision-making capabilities. Finally, two of the studies did not provide any explicit justifications for the inclusion of the learning organization concept in the articles (Kaminska and Borzillo 2018; Langenus and Doods 2018).

An analysis of the content suggests that the majority of recent authors view the learning organization as a relevant concept for organizational culture development, and in particular, to better engage employees and enhance service delivery. In one particular study (Gelmon et al. 2018), the five disciplines were specifically mentioned as practices associated to help overcome challenges in implementing change. Influencing organizational performance outcomes, growing innovative capability, and knowledge sharing among co-workers were also reasons suggested to demonstrate the usefulness of the learning organization. In order to influence organizational performance outcome in

Table 2.1 Recent articles on the learning organization

S/No.	Justification used for including the learning organization concept in the study	Country/Region	Industry/Sector	Reference
1.	To maintain superior performance outcomes in the emerging knowledge economy.	United Arab Emirates	Service	Siddique (2018)
2.	To build an inter-organizational network to improve the dimensions of sustainability.	Europe	Maritime	Langenus and Dooms (2018)
3.	To create a patient-safety culture.	Abu Dhabi	Healthcare	Mirza et al. (2018)
4.	That leadership affects culture and learning structure, and both impact on innovation capacity.	Spain	Education	Gil et al. (2018)
5.	To store knowledge and experience in ensuring sustainability of communities and resources.	Italy	Social	Ricciardelli et al. (2018)
6.	To ensure competitive advantage in the cities.	China	Public	Boshier (2018)
7.	To create a culture leading to greater involvement of employee and team building.	India	Healthcare	Ravichandran and Mishra (2018)
8.	To capture knowledge and share information in the design process to improve project performance.	Egypt	Construction	Othman and Elsaay (2018)
9.	To overcome challenges in implementing the patient-centered care model such as shifting patterns of care use and refining care processes.	United States	Healthcare	Gelmon et al. (2018)
10.	Links to and facilitates person-centered nutritional care and patient safety.	Sweden	Healthcare	Westergren et al. (2018)
11.	To create and sustain a learning environment as a motivator for performance, engagement, and retention.	United States	Healthcare	Ward et al. (2018)
12.	To react more quickly to changing external environments, embrace innovations in internal organization, and improve student outcomes.	Slovenia	Education	Janežiča et al. (2018)
13.	To overcome the challenges faced by the organization when the commitment and buy-in from the employees is not sustained.	India	Public	Karve and Aggarwal-Gupta (2018)
14.	To embed new thinking and practices that continuously renew and transform the organization in ways that support shared aims.	Canada	Education	Liu and Liu (2018)

(continued)

Table 2.1 Continued

S/No.	Justification used for including the learning organization concept in the study	Country/Region	Industry/Sector	Reference
15.	To invest in limited human resource and develop talents.	Lebanon	Finance	Chai and Dirani (2018)
16.	To drive product innovation.	Indonesia	Chemical	Hamdani and Susilawati (2018)
17.	To take up the learning organization model because of reduced public funding and pressures to attend to the performance demands of the global marketplace.	Canada	Education	Gouthro et al. (2018)
18.	Has a direct effect on organizational performance and commitment, and that organizational commitment has a direct effect on organizational performance.	Thailand	R&D	Khunsoonthornkit and Panjakajornsak (2018)
19.	The impact of learning organization on employee empowerment.	Jordan	Utilities	Melhem (2018)
20.	To address challenges to the emergence of a learning organization posed by a context of generational diversity and an enterprise social networking system.	France	High technology	Kaminska and Borzillo (2018)
21.	To examine the structural relationships among learning organization culture, self-efficacy, work engagement, and job performance	South Korea	Education	Song et al. (2018)
22.	To develop the police toward working in a more knowledge-based manner.	Norway	Public	Borge et al. (2018)
23.	To explain the implementation of entrepreneurial competence of principals based on creativity and innovation in realizing good school governance.	Indonesia	Education	Syam et al. (2018)
24.	To create a learning culture in facilitating better organized healthcare delivery.	China	Healthcare	He and Chen (2018)

Source: Scopus database (January to end September 2018).

cities through competitive advantage, Boshier (2018) posited that individuals should develop personal mastery and a shared vision within the political system.

The sample was also grouped by the country or region of origin where the entity was studied and by industry or sector. By region, seven studies were conducted from Europe and Central Asia, six were from East Asia and Pacific, five were from the Middle East and North Africa, four were from North America, and two were from South Asia. By industry or sector, six were from healthcare, six were from education, three were from the public sector, and the rest of the nine were from a unique industry or sector such as construction, high technology, and chemicals.

It is observed that the current level of interest in the learning organization remains relatively strong in Europe, Asia, and the Middle East. North America seemed to be lagging or exhibiting a lower level of interest in the concept in recent times. Finally, healthcare and education organizations seemed to be embracing the learning organization concept.

Summing up the analysis of recent articles on learning organization, the main justifications provided in the studies were related to its role in improving organizational culture, performance, and innovation capacity. Compared to North America, there were more studies originating from Europe, Asia, and the Middle East. There were also more studies that focused on healthcare and education organizations.

CURRENT LEVEL OF INTEREST IN THE LEARNING ORGANIZATION

Management fashions are relatively transitory collective beliefs produced by a community and promoted to consumer organizations that a certain technique leads to management progress (Abrahamson and Fairchild 1999). A common quantitative research method used to determine management fashions and evaluate the topicality of concepts is the use of print media indicators. This method is based on the premise that the number of publications on a topic found in bibliographic databases reflects its level of interest.

Print media indicators were used to better understand the level of interest in the learning organization. Four different databases that cover a wide range of topics and media were identified to determine the level of interest in the learning organization over time. The selected databases were ABI/INFORM, Scopus, Web of Science, and EBSCO. ABI/INFORM is a business database that covers full-text journals, dissertations, working papers, key business, and economics periodicals. Web of Science is an abstracts and citations database for science and social sciences journals. EBSCO includes a research database covering topics such as business and science.

The search procedure consisted of a keyword search on “learning organization” from the period 1990, the time when *The Fifth Discipline* was first published, to the third quarter (3Q) 2018. The search field included all document types in the available databases. The results are presented in Figure 2.1. A linear trend line or best fit straight line was added to determine whether the number of publications is increasing or decreasing at a steady rate over time. The figure shows an increasing trend on the number of documents across all four identified bibliographic databases. The results suggest that there is a growing level of interest among scientific researchers focusing on the learning organization since 1990. Scientific researchers are defined as formal investigators who adopt a more rigorous approach to examine a topic using bibliographic databases.

Google Trends is a real time daily and weekly index of the volume of queries that users enter into Google (Choi and Varian 2012). The maximum query share in the time

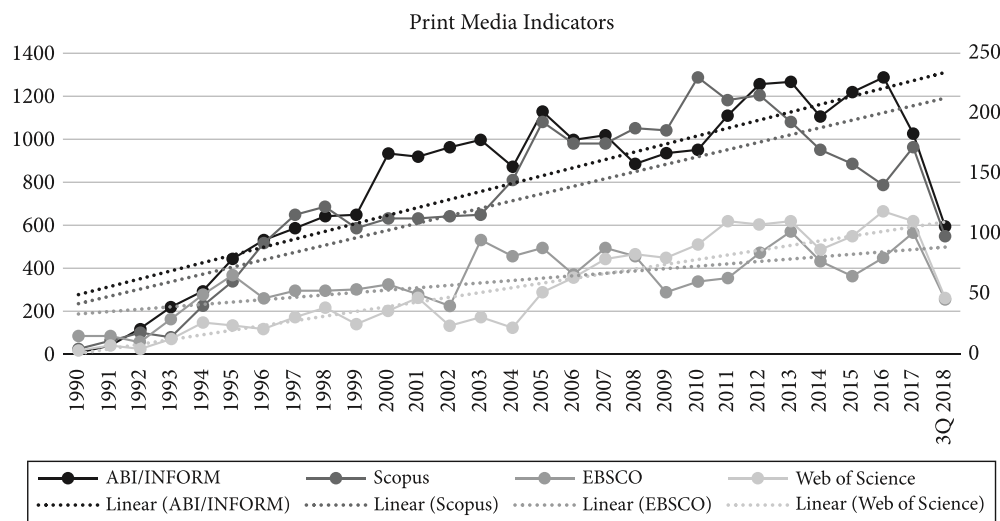


FIGURE 2.1. Print media indicators results.

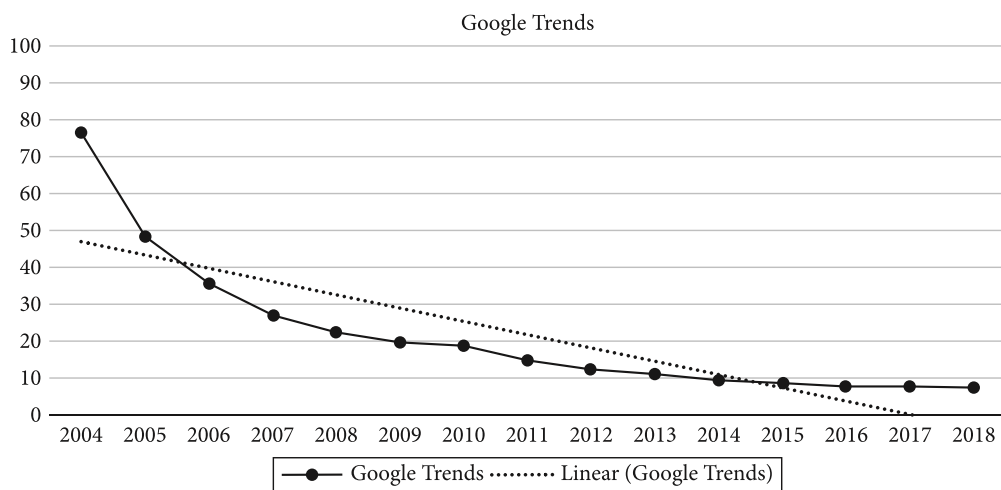


FIGURE 2.2. Google Trends results.

period specified is normalized to be 100, and the query share at the initial date being examined is normalized to be zero. Unlike bibliographic databases which cater to scientific researchers, Google Trends provides an avenue for the casual researchers who are informal investigators preferring to conduct simple internet searches on topics of interest.

Applying the same procedure for the bibliographic database search, the Google Trends results were graphed (see Figure 2.2). The data from Google Trends is only available from 2004 onwards. The graph shows a decreasing trend on the number of documents searched using the keyword “learning organization” since 2004. The results suggest that there is a declining level of interest among casual researchers inquiring about the concept.

DISCUSSION

Returning to the twin questions of “What is the current level of interest in the learning organization concept?” and “Is the concept still relevant today?” in terms of current level of interest, it is evident that there is a growing level of interest among the scientific community as shown by the increasing trend lines from the four bibliographic databases. Although the number of publications fluctuates between 1990 and 2018, overall, the trend is on the rise. This rise in the level of interest among scientific researchers could be due to the fact that the concept is now more accepted in mainstream management thought and has reached a certain degree of maturity in the theory development cycle. Of course, it may also be possible that scientific researchers create and follow management fashions (Bort and Kieser 2011). Through a combination of factors such as authors’ reputation, accessibility of avenues for publishing, and development of empirical research methodology, it becomes increasingly more attractive to study a concept and, consequently, creating a management fashion.

On the other hand, there is a declining level of interest among casual researchers as shown by the downward trend line from Google Trends. This result suggests that the concept is less popular among casual researchers now than it was in the 2000s. One possible explanation of the decline among casual researchers could be a lack of promotion of the learning organization in mainstream media such as newspapers, television, and books and the proliferation of other new management ideas over time.

Geographically, the greater proportion of research documents coming from countries outside of the United States suggests that interest in the concept has shifted from the country of origin to other parts of the world especially Europe, Central and East Asia, and the Middle East. Such shifts from one geographical area to other areas over time could be due to socio-economic factors. The rise in employment, education, and income may cause a shift in management thought and practice. For example, the emphasis may change from an authoritative to a more democratic style of management. This emphasis, in turn, would require a different approach such as the learning organization recommended by Senge (1990) to build the organization and develop the employees.

Sector-wise, healthcare and education organizations seem to favor learning organization initiatives. One possible explanation could be that such organizations tend to focus more on collaborative effort to achieve social outcomes. The nature of these industries requires individuals and groups to work jointly in a more complex ecosystem with many stakeholders where profit may not be the only measurement of success. Another more straightforward explanation could be that there is easier access to healthcare and education organizations compared to commercial organizations to conduct these learning organization studies.

From a relevance or usefulness perspective, the views are mixed because it is subjective depending on what, who, when, and how the issue is raised. For every opponent of the concept (Adžić 2018; Grieves 2008), there seems to be a success story to counter it

(Sheaff and Pilgrim 2006; Sinclair 2017). Rover and Siemens were two commercial companies that were named as examples of failure of the learning organization concept (Adžić 2018; Grieves 2008). However, there are also many success stories of public entities such as the British National Health Service and a Canadian public library showing good progress on the learning organization path (Sheaff and Pilgrim 2006; Sinclair 2017). Given the ongoing debate regarding the definition and interpretation of the learning organization, it may be difficult to provide a verdict.

Nonetheless, as a general term, the learning organization may indeed be of little practical value because it is too broad and generic. The subjective nature of the construct and its measurement also make it a challenge to derive any conclusive evidence on its effectiveness as a management concept (Grieves 2008). However, if one delves deeper into the specific practices of the learning organization such as team learning and systems thinking for the purpose of organizational culture development, employee development, and performance improvement, it is difficult to argue that these practices are futile management actions that would result in poor desired outcomes. Therefore, it is posited that the learning organization is still relevant today especially for its role in improving organizational culture, performance, and innovation capacity.

Some caveats to the proposition should, however, be noted. Perhaps some types of organizations are more conducive to introduce and promote the learning organization concept (see Dixon, Chapter 18 in this volume). The nature of the organization such as the extent of tasks, people orientation, and politics and ethics play a crucial role in determining the success of organizational culture development. In addition, some industries or sectors may be more favorable for developing learning organization programs (see Örténblad, Chapter 25 in this volume). External forces such as technological and social changes in the environment could affect the way managers and employees interact among themselves and with other key stakeholders to stay competitive. Consequently, there is a need to be selective in applying the concept in organizations within specific industries or sectors to determine its relevance or usefulness. Some of the examples may include healthcare and education organizations.

LIMITATIONS AND FURTHER RESEARCH

There are some limitations related to the study in this chapter: firstly, the restricted scope on the selection of the publications for content analysis. The present content analysis was based on a single keyword search on “learning organization” and those articles that were published between January and September 2018. Secondly, there is the issue of bias arising from the composition of bibliographic databases (Benders, Nijholt, and Heusinkveld 2007). Although four of the more popular and relevant databases or information service providers were selected, there may be a need to include other databases in order to present a more holistic picture on the current level of interest in the learning organization.

Therefore, further research could expand on the number of documents selected for content analysis by including related topics such as organizational learning and knowledge management and extending the period for those publications before 2018. It would also be useful to include more bibliographic databases as part of the print media indicators. Any discussion on the relevance or usefulness of a concept should take into account the megatrends which drive the world today. Only by understanding how businesses and governments are being impacted in the present can one more accurately assess the relevance of a concept. Thus, further research could include an examination of megatrends such as digitalization in relation to the relevance of the learning organization.

CONCLUSION

Although the level of interest in the learning organization among casual researchers has declined, the level of interest among scientific researchers has grown. There is also relatively more interest in the concept outside of the United States and among health-care and education organizations. The learning organization concept is still relevant today because of its role in improving organizational culture, performance, and innovation capacity.

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