

## By Contribution

# Organisational Learning & Work Engagement: Study of an IT Organization

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*The study explores the link between organization learning and work engagement in an IT Organisation. Dimensions of the Learning Organization Questionnaire was used to collect data from the sample respondents. The data was subjected to statistical analysis. Regression results indicate that only two dimensions (connecting the organization to the environment and empowering employees) out of the seven Dimensions of the Learning Organization Questionnaire emerged as significant predictors of work engagement. The results and implications of the findings are discussed.*

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## Introduction

Coping with uncertainty and turbulence has become imperative for organizations to survive. The survival/coping strategies are an outcome of accumulation/acquisition of new knowledge that happens through 'learning'. The rate at which individuals and organizations learn may become the only sustainable competitive advantage (Stata, 1989). Hence, learning can be viewed as something very vital to the core of an organization.

Learning per se happens in all organizations, but when the amount and nature of learning happens in a large scale/magnitude, such an organization could be termed as a 'learning organization'. Though the concept of 'organizational learning' is rooted in academic and practitioner literature since a long time, 'learning organization' became more popular with the advent of Senge's work in 1990 through his seminal work *The Fifth Discipline*. Senge (1990) defines a learning organization as one "where people continuously expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is

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set free, and where people are continually learning how to learn together". So a learning organization is one where new knowledge is generated with the collective learning of people. From its inception till date, the notion of 'learning organization' has captured the attention of both researchers and practicing managers as 'something' that can be incorporated into organizational design, to bring significant effect on organizational outcome. This concept was conceived as something that can be incorporated into organizational design, to bring about significant impact on organizational outcome. According to (McGill & Slocum, 1993:67), the primary responsibility of the management and the focus of management practices in learning organization are to create and foster a climate that promotes learning. Here the management encourages 'experimentation creates a climate for open communication, promotes constructive dialogue, and facilitates the processing of experience'. On the other hand, employees are responsible for 'gathering, examining, and using the information that drives the learning processes'. The several core behaviors pertaining to such type of organizations are; learning culture, continuous experimentation, network intimacy, accurate information systems, reward system that recognizes and reinforces learning, proper selection of human resources, and role of leader in promoting

learning. (Watkins & Marsick, 1996) identified seven complementary action imperatives that lead organizations towards becoming learning organizations. These are, create continuous learning opportunities, promote inquiry and dialogue, encourage collaboration and team learning, establish systems to capture and share learning, empower people toward a collective vision, connect the organization to its environment, use leaders who model and support learning at the individual, team, and organizational levels. According to (Ulrich et al., 1993a: 52), in order to build and diffuse learning throughout an organization, managers should ensure that certain ideas that need to be generated and generalized in the organization. Some of these are; building a culture focused on learning capability, development of competence, ensuring a fluid organizational structure, proper reward management system. Thus, certain attributes or characteristics are unique to a learning organization.

Mishra et al. (2005) suggested certain learning mechanisms through which organizations augment adaptability requirements and stand out as learning organizations. What distinguishes learning organizations from others? Do they have some specific attributes that define their learning capability? Is there a relationship between organizational learning capability and performance outcomes? In this context, Mishra et al. (2005) noted "one of the major research challenges articulated in the literature is in establishing relationship between attributes of a learning organization and organizational performance".

Watkins & Marsick (1996: 4) proposed an integrated model for a learning organization and defined one as “that learns continuously and transforms itself . . . Learning is a continuous, strategically used process – integrated with and running parallel to work”. They proposed seven action imperatives or dimensions viz., create continuous learning opportunities, promote inquiry and dialogue, encourage collaboration and team learning, create systems to capture and share learning, empower people toward a collective vision, connect the organization to its environment, provide strategic leadership for learning and two dimensions relating to performance outcomes viz., financial performance and knowledge performance that characterize organizations in their journey towards learning organizations. Further they proposed that learning activities should occur at four organizational levels, i.e., individual, team and/or group, organizational, and global. The seven dimensions in this model address learning activities at the above mentioned four levels in an organization.

### **Work Engagement**

Organizations need proactive employees who can take initiative and collaborate seemly with their colleagues and own responsibility for their own development and deliver high quality work. Thus, employees are needed who feel energetic and dedicated, and who are absorbed by their work. In other words, organizations need engaged workers (Bakker & Schaufeli, 2008).

There are three dimensions of Work Engagement viz., vigor, dedication, and absorption (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004). Vigor is high energy, resilience, a willingness to invest effort on the job, the ability to not be easily fatigued, and persistence when confronted with difficulties. Dedication is a strong involvement in work, enthusiasm, and sense of pride and inspiration. Absorption is a pleasant state of being immersed in one’s work experiencing time passing quickly, and being unable to detach from the job. Highly engaged employees identify with their jobs personally and are deeply motivated to work. They tend to work harder and more productively than the others and are more likely to produce the results their customers and organizations want.

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Engagement was formally defined by Kahn (1990) as “the simultaneous employment and expression of a person’s preferred self in task behaviors that promote connections to work and to others, personal presence (physical, cognitive, emotional) and active, full performances”. Based on the perspective of Kahn, employee engagement is the best description of a multidimensional motivational concept reflecting the simultaneous investment of an individual’s physical, cognitive, and emotional energy in active and full performance. Employee engagement is a positive attitude held by the employee towards the organization and its value.

The attributes of employee engagement enlist culture of respect, constructive feedback, opportunities for advancement, rewards and recognitions, leadership, clear job responsibilities and necessary equipment for work. Existence of wellness program is also important (Gurcheik, 2008), strong training and development opportunities, encouraging team inclusion, customized benefits, and promoting a culture that includes flexibility and supervisor supportiveness. Many studies found reward and incentive programs as triggers for enhancing engagement (Miller, 2008). Individual, worker-centered factors have included a sense of contribution (Soyars & Brusino, 2009), a strong identification with their work (Bakker, Schaufeli, Leiter, & Taris, 2008), connections to other employees and supervisors (Soyars & Brusino, 2009), a sense of personal control (Pech, 2009), opportunities for learning, ability to offer suggestions, feedback about the results of efforts, and worker empowerment (Rhoads, 2009). Thomas (2009) focused on employee engagement as the development of intrinsic rewards. Such rewards included a sense of meaningfulness, competence, choice, and progress. These are guided by the ability to self-manage.

### **Organization Learning & Work Engagement**

Literature has been silent on the link between learning organization and work engagement. But there seems to be an underlying linkage between the two. Learning at the individual level is “the ways in which people make meaning

of situations they encounter, and the way in which they acquire and apply the knowledge, attitudes, and skills they need to act in new ways” (Watkins & Marsick, 1999: 81). Individual learning is fostered by creating continuous learning opportunities and promoting inquiry and dialogue (Watkins & Marsick, 2003). Through teams, people learn how to work collaboratively, which is valued by the culture and rewarded. This leads to the engagement of employees in their work. Kahn’s (1990) seminal grounded theory of engagement and disengagement posited that employee engagement was the concurrent expression of one’s preferred self and the promotion of connections to others. Disengagement was posited to be the withdrawal of oneself and of one’s preferred behaviors, promoting a lack of overall connectedness, emotional absence and passive behavior. The choice to express one’s authentic self was understood as the emotional, social and physical act of engagement (Shuck & Wollard, 2010). Humans become drawn into their work, physically and emotionally, in ways that display how they experience work. “Self expression underlies what researchers refer to as creativity, the use of personal voice, emotional expression, authenticity, non-defensive communication, playfulness, and ethical behavior” (Kahn, 1990: 700). Every day, workers choose to “express and employ their [authentic] selves [. . .] or withdraw and defend their [authentic] selves” at work (Kahn, 1990: 692). Thus, it appears logical to propose that organizational learning fosters better work en-

agement among employees. Thus, the objectives of the study are:

**Organizational learning fosters better work engagement among employees.**

- 1) To explore the link between organization learning and employee engagement.
- 2) To examine how higher organizational learning leads to better work engagement.

**Hypotheses of the Study**

- H1:* Creating continuous learning opportunities is positively related to work engagement.
- H2:* Promoting inquiry and dialogue within in the organization will lead to higher work engagement.
- H3:* Higher the collaboration and team learning, higher the work engagement.
- H4:* Empowering employees towards common vision will lead to higher work engagement.
- H5:* Providing a strategic leadership to learning will lead to higher work engagement.
- H6:* Connecting the organization to the environment will positively lead to work engagement.
- H7:* Strategic Leadership will lead to positive work engagement.

**Methodology**

The study was conducted in a multinational IT firm operating in the National Capital Region of Delhi. This was founded in 1990 with a promise to deliver the right business results on time and on budget. It is a public listed company headquartered in Boston and has offices across US, Canada, Germany and Netherlands, India and UK. This is a global services firm that innovates in marketing, technology and business operations. This organization is known for its cutting edge HR practices and is a trendsetter in many innovative practices. The purpose of its existence is to be a great company enabling human potential.

**Sample & Procedure**

Full-time employees working for the organization constituted the sample for the research. The responses of the employees were captured on a structured questionnaire. The researchers also visited the research site during the research. The questionnaire survey was administered online to the sample respondents. The link to the soft copy of the questionnaire was mailed to the target respondents. The respondents accessed the questionnaire clicking on the link provided to them during their office hours or at their leisure time. The link was sent to 157 employees, out of which 87 responses were obtained. Out of the 87 respondents, 51 were males and 36 were females. The respondents were asked not to mention their names and were assured confidentiality of the data.

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## Measures

Two measures were used to collect data for the study. These were standard questionnaires and were in English language as all the working managers had good knowledge of English.

*The Dimensions of the Learning Organization Questionnaire (DLOQ):* Watkins & Marsick (1996: 4) proposed an integrated model for a learning organization and defined a learning organization as “one that learns continuously and transforms itself . . . Learning is a continuous, strategically used process – integrated with and running parallel to work”. They proposed seven action imperatives or dimensions and two dimensions relating to performance outcomes that characterize organizations in their journey towards learning organizations. The seven dimensions are continuous learning, inquiry and dialogue, collaboration and team learning, systems that capture and share learning, people empowerment, connecting the organization to its environment, and strategic leadership for learning, and two dimensions relating to results/outcomes (financial performance and knowledge performance). The seven dimensions of learning organization are categorized into four levels:

- (1) Individual level (continuous learning, inquiry and dialogue)
- (2) Team level (team learning)
- (3) Organization level (empowerment, systems that capture and share learning)

- (4) Global level (strategic leadership and connection to environment)

The original DLOQ has 55 items. But for this study, the shorter version of DLOQ with 21 items was used to collect data. All the seven dimensions mentioned above have three items each which sums the total number of items to 21. The DLOQ is a very well established scale used in various contexts in different countries. It has sound psychometric properties. The coefficient of alpha for these seven dimensions is presented in Table 1. DLOQ is a six-point likert scale.

*Work Engagement Scale:* The work engagement scale was developed by Schaufeli & Bakker (2003). This scale assesses work engagement through three dimensions i.e., viz. absorption, dedication and vigor. The original version of the scale has seventeen items. For this study, the shorter version of the scale with nine items was chosen. The questionnaire is available in many foreign languages. It is a seven point likert scale.

## Results

The scale on Dimensions of Learning Organisation Questionnaire and Work Engagement were established scales. The reliability of the scales was assessed through Cronbach’s coefficient alpha. The reliability coefficients of the study variables is given in Table 1 which shows that reliabilities of the study variables range from .743 to .969 which is acceptable. The results of reliability coefficients indicate that the measures have sound psychometric properties.

**Table 1 Reliability Coefficients of the Study Variables**

Scale	No of Items	Cronbach Alpha
Create Continuous Learning Opportunities	3	.869
Promote inquiry and dialogue	3	.744
Encourage Collaboration and Team Learning	3	.779
Create Systems to capture and Share Learning	3	.796
Empower people toward a collective vision	3	.921
Connect the organization to its environment	3	.743
Provide strategic leadership for learning	3	.853
Work Engagement	9	.969

After establishing the reliabilities of all the scales, we formed composite variables for each construct from their respective items and used those composites as single predictors of their respective factors. Almost all the correlations among study variables are in the expected direction. Means, standard deviations and inter correlations of the study variables are given in Table 2.

**Table 2 Means, Standard Deviation & Correlations among Study Variables**

	Means	SD	CL	ID	CTL	SCL	EP	CO	SL	ENG
CL	10.824	3.680	1							
ID			.775**	1						
CTL	11.000	3.667	.690**	.697**	1					
SCL	10.108	3.699	.543**	.496**	.687**	1				
EP	9.973	3.814	.533**	.496**	.738**	.857**	1			
CO	10.378	4.130	.559**	.457**	.678**	.805**	.822**	1		
SL	10.364	4.056		.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	1	
ENG	9.445	4.304	.541**	.561**	.744**	.828**	.847**	.791**	.791**	1
	40.135	12.494	.192	.117	.477**	.668**	.761**	.736**	.635**	.635**
			.101	.320	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000

0.01 Level (2-tailed)  
N= 87

To test our hypotheses, work engagement was regressed on all the seven dimensions of DLOQ using step-wise regression method. The results of the step-wise regression analysis are presented in Table 3. It can be observed that out of the seven dimensions of DLOQ, only the two dimensions viz., connect the organization to the environment (*H6*) and empowering people (*H4*) emerge as predic-

tors of work engagement. Though inquiry and dialogue (ID) is one of the predictors of work engagement (WE), but the beta coefficients are negative and the correlation between the ID and WE is not significant.

**Table 3 Results of Regression between Dimensions of DLOQ & Work Engagement**

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.761(a)	.579	.573	8.16518
2	.818(b)	.669	.660	7.29064
3	.848(c)	.719	.707	6.76265

a Predictors: Empowering People

b Predictors: Empowering People and Inquiry and Dialogue

c Predictors: Empowering People, Inquiry and Dialogue and Connecting Organization to Environment

Criterion: Work Engagement

**Table 4 Coefficients(a)**

Model		Non-standardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	16.250	2.582		6.293	.000
	EMP	2.301	.231	.761	9.947	.000
2	(Constant)	23.817	2.878		8.277	.000
	EP	2.821	.238	.932	11.852	.000
	ID	-1.178	.268	-.346	-4.394	.000
3	(Constant)	21.956	2.721		8.070	.000
	EP	1.874	.347	.620	5.404	.000
	ID	-1.264	.250	-.371	-5.062	.000
	CO	1.219	.345	.396	3.538	.001

Dependent Variable: Work Engagement

## Discussion

Out of the Seven dimensions of DLOQ, only two dimensions viz., connecting organization to environment and empowering employees emerge as predictors of work engagement (WE). The third dimension that entered into the regression equation is inquiry and dialogue (ID) but the correlation between the ID and WE is not significant (Table 2) and in the regression equation, though it emerged as one of the predictors but the

beta coefficients were negative and hence it does not support our *H2* and hence the hypothesis is not proved. The other four dimensions of DLOQ did not emerge as predictors of work engagement. Employees feel more engaged when they are empowered to take decisions and are given more autonomy in their work. We see a shift in organizations where empowerment as an attribute is practiced and encouraged among all progressive organizations. With the advent of the knowledge enterprise and

knowledge employees, the era of control and command is giving way to empowering work places. Therefore, it should be the concern of business and HR managers to empower their employees immensely so that they feel more attached to the workplace and work.

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Adapting to the external environment and capability to cope with change is one of the yardsticks for survival. One of the strong predictors of work engagement in the study is connecting the organization to the environment. Employees in the process while establishing connections with the environment might acquire some new skills/competencies which may hold them in good stead for their future employability. This might foster better engagement with their work. It is a little difficult to explain why the other four dimensions fail to predict work engagement. It might have something to do with the sample organization taken for the study or due to some other factor.

## Conclusion

Organizational learning can foster work engagement. Taking a cue from the study, two factors that strongly predict work engagement, are connecting organization to environment and empowering employees. Organizations have to design systems in such a way that employees

feel empowered on jobs and they are constantly looking for opportunities wherein they can develop right connections to the environment and they can shape up and re-skill themselves for better employability and future job prospects.

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