

# Social Learning 2014: Gaining Importance

## Industry Perspective



David Wentworth  
July 2014

## *Industry Perspective*

# **Social Learning 2014: Gaining Importance**

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**July 2014**

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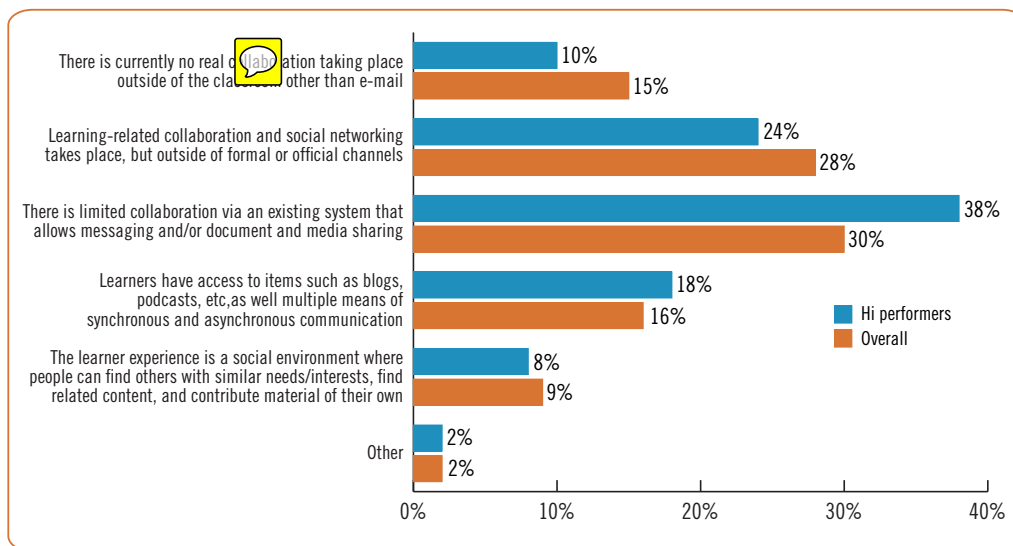
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## Executive Summary

Social media has become a ubiquitous part of many of our lives, especially in our personal lives. But the tools and platforms that allow us to connect with friends and family in such a multitude of ways are slowly but surely finding a home within the enterprise. Workers are able to share more with more people in more ways than ever before. This type of technology-enabled collaboration is beginning to live up to its potential within the learning function.

Brandon Hall Group’s 2014 Social and Collaborative Learning study found that about 85% of companies are at least experimenting with social learning tools and techniques.

**Figure 1: Approaches to Social/Collaborative Learning in Organizations**



Source: Brandon Hall Group, 2014

High-performing companies (defined as companies having increased revenues and improved a majority of their key performance indicators over the previous year) are leading the way, if only slightly, when it comes to using these approaches. There are still many challenges facing organizations that are trying to deploy social learning initiatives. Companies are afraid of relinquishing control to the learners themselves. They are also quite unsure how to measure this type of learning activity. Within the larger picture of social and collaborative learning, however, there are areas where high performers are clearly ahead of the pack:

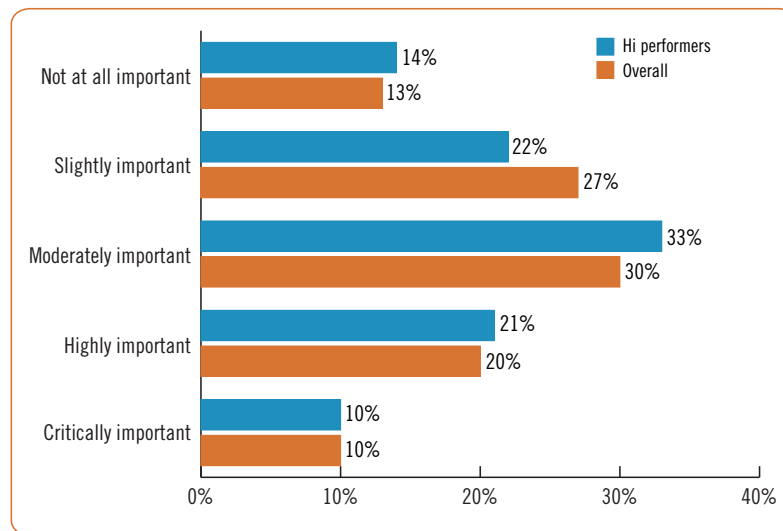
- There is more informal learning occurring within high-performing organizations.
- High performers are less likely to block access to public social media sites.
- High performers are more likely to use social learning tools such as learner comments, discussion forums, and content ratings.
- There are more coaching and mentoring opportunities at high-performing organizations.
- High performers do a far better job at measuring the effectiveness of social and collaborative learning.

As the first Millennials enter their early thirties, this generation is becoming a larger part of the workforce. They bring with them the life of a digital native, where they are accustomed to certain levels of technological interaction and freedom not often found in the average company. But this influx of new workers is not the sole reason to get started using social media for learning, nor is it the most important. Instead, companies need to recognize that interaction, collaboration and sharing is how people naturally want to learn. Employing the technologies that make these types of relationships possible is imperative to any organization that wants to be an employer of choice and have a continuously developing workforce.

### Importance of Social Learning

According to Brandon Hall Group's Business Focus 2014 survey, organizations are more concerned with how to approach social media over the next 12 months than they are with a shortage of talent, big data, or global expansion. The 2014 Social and Collaborative Learning study seeks to dive deeper into how organizations view social learning and the different approaches being taken. One thing is clear from that survey: responding organizations believe the concept is important and is only going to increase in importance.

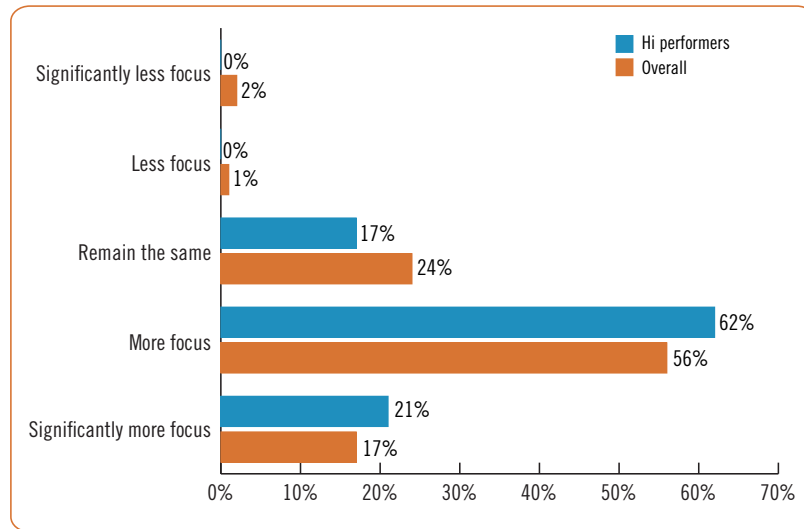
**Figure 2: Importance of Social Media Technologies for Learning**



Source: Brandon Hall Group, 2014

The challenge is that few organizations have a complete understanding of what social technologies mean for their learning function. In fact, the attitudes toward social learning technologies ranges from seeing them as time-wasting fads, to looking at them as something you simply buy from a vendor, to organizations that see them as a cultural shift in learning. This research will attempt to cut through the hype and the myths and discover what is really working and how organizations can best leverage the technologies now at their disposal.

Figure 3: Expected Change in Social Learning Focus Over the Next Year



Source: Brandon Hall Group, 2014

### The Oldest Form of Learning

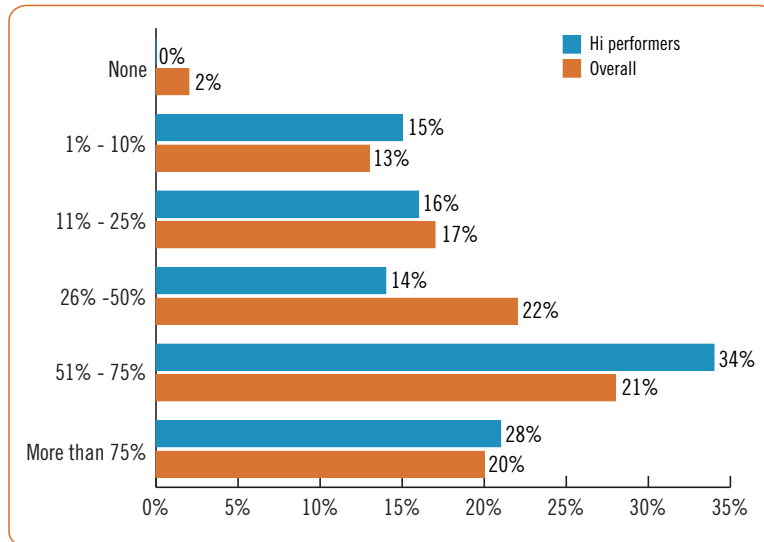
From an anthropological standpoint, social and collaborative learning is probably the oldest form of learning. Humans have spent their entire existence learning from one another and working together to achieve goals. It is only in recent history that we have managed to turn learning into more formal, instructor-led events. For decades now, this has been where corporate learning functions have been investing the bulk of their time, energy and money: formal learning. Even as disruptive technologies such as e-learning emerged, they became formalized and molded to the instructor-led archetype.

This is still the case despite the fact that numerous studies have shown that the majority of an organization’s learning takes place outside of formal channels. Our own research indicates that most learning is informal, even if it might not be the 70%-80% that is commonly cited (see Figure 4, following page).

What is clear, however, is that high-performing organizations say there is more informal learning occurring than the average company. Among high performers, 55% say that more than half of the learning that occurs is informal, while 47% of all companies say the same thing.

Humans have always learned this way, and a large portion of effective learning today is taking place in a social or collaborative fashion. Yet organizations have continually failed to ingrain this type of learning into their strategies. This is a huge challenge, especially given the fact that most companies are looking for ways to make learning a continuous part of an employee’s career. There is a desire to move away from event-driven learning that only occurs once in a while.

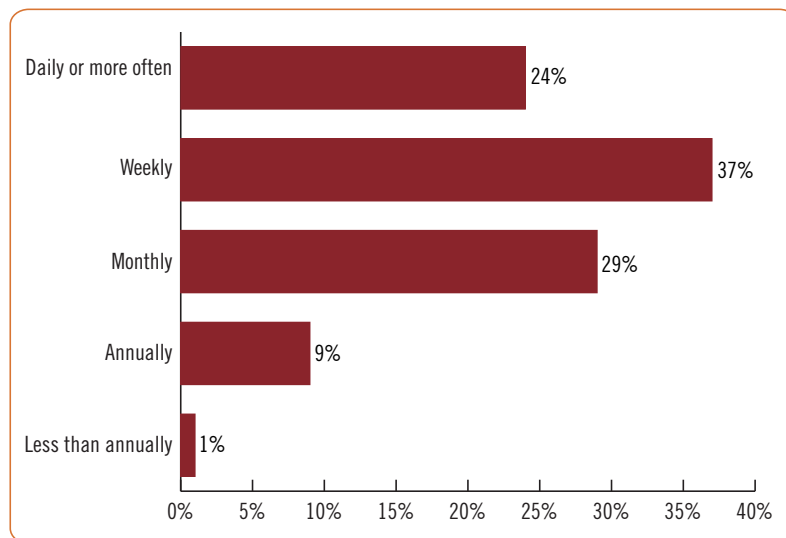
Figure 4: Amount of Learning Occurring Via Informal Channels




Source: Brandon Hall Group, 2014

With more than 60% of companies expecting their employees to interact with learning weekly or more frequently, there is no way a traditional learning format will accomplish this (Figure 5). Companies simply cannot expect their people to attend an hour-long class or engage in a 90-minute module every single week.

Figure 5: Needed Frequency of Connection to Learning Resources




Source: Brandon Hall Group, 2014

Fortunately, we are now experiencing a time where technology has converged with this need for continuous learning, and companies are finally catching up to how humans already interact with one another. A few short years ago, companies were barely testing the waters with social media technologies for learning. Now, we see widespread adoption in  form or another.

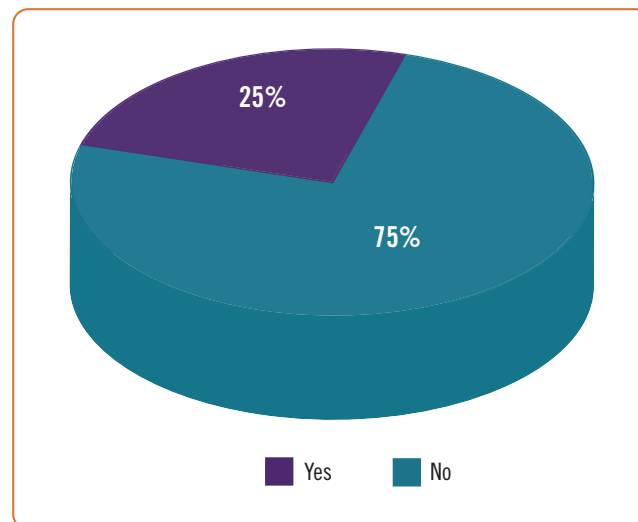
Whereas this type of learning was once only used by high-performing companies, we can see now that a significant portion of all companies are experimenting, with very little difference based on performance levels.

That is not to say that the journey is complete. Of the 85% of companies that say there is at least some social and collaborative learning occurring, the majority of them are still taking a relatively rudimentary approach. More than one quarter of companies (28%) say that this type of learning still takes place outside of official channels, meaning there is no enterprise tool or platform allowing people to connect or share knowledge. Another 30% use existing systems to allow people to message one another and share documents and other media. This is typically what you would find in any given company.

One quarter of organizations, however, have moved beyond this stage and are engaging in truly “social” media for learning. They are leveraging things such as blogs, discussions and other tools to make it easier to connect and share. A few of these companies have even deployed  social learning environments.

As the main learning technology platform for many organizations, the learning management system (LMS) is often the first place a company will look for social learning tools. However, despite the push for more collaborative technologies, few companies are able to rely on their LMS to provide a social learning environment.


**Figure 6: Presence of a Social Media-Focused Dashboard for Learning in LMS**



Source: Brandon Hall Group, 2014



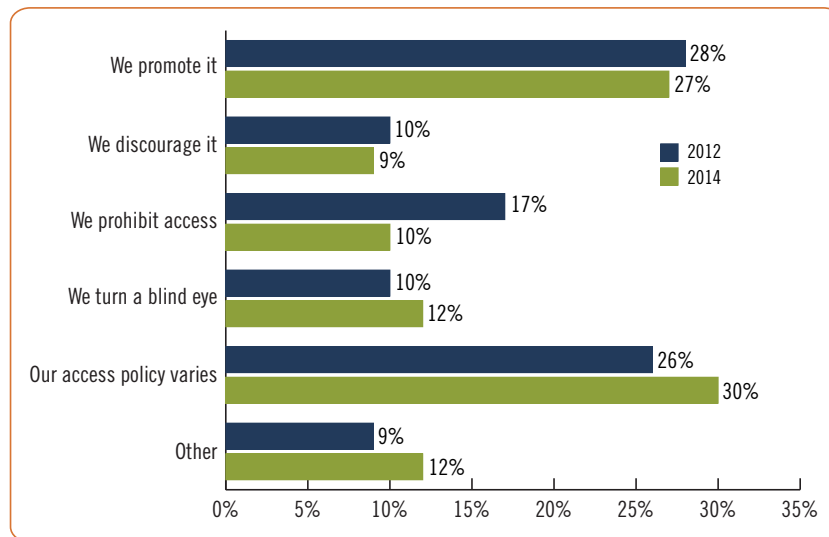
## Research Methodology

This study was developed after collecting data and analyzing the practices of high-performing organizations (HiPOs) and their lower-performing counterparts. For the purposes of this study, HiPOs are organizations whose revenue as well as a majority of key performance indicators have gone up over the past year. Our methodology is a multi-tiered approach that included an online survey of a wide variety of organizations across a broad set of industries and sizes. The survey was conducted in April and May of 2014 and received 254 responses. (See complete methodology on page 2 )

## Collaborative Tools

Attitudes toward social media for the enterprise are changing. A good barometer to how it is viewed by corporations is their policies on public social media platforms. In just the last two years, there has been a shift in how sites like Facebook and LinkedIn are perceived.

Figure 7:  **Organizational Policy on Employee Access to Social Media Sites from Company-Owned Devices**



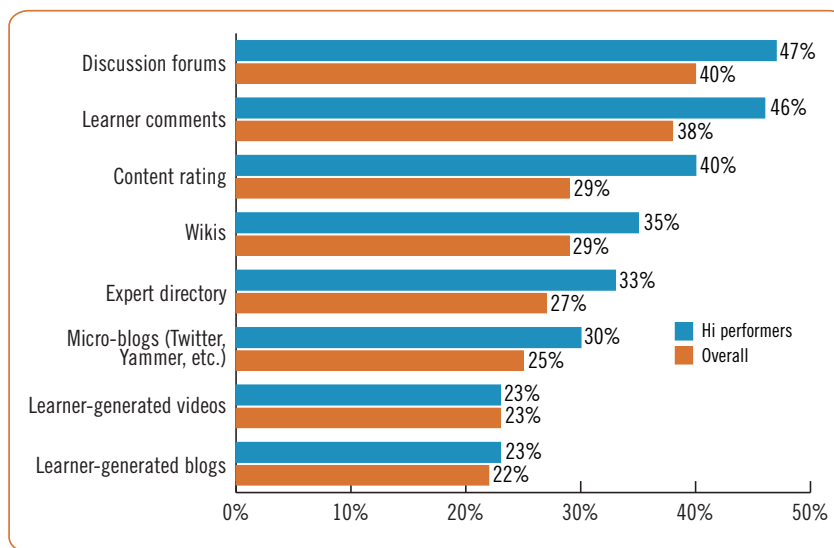
Source: Brandon Hall Group, 2014

While most of the policies have remained relatively stable, the number of companies prohibiting access to these external sites has dropped by about 40%. As companies soften their stance, we see an increase in the number of companies with variable policies. The majority of companies that selected “Other” describe a policy very much in line with “We turn a blind eye,” saying things like “We neither promote nor discourage” and “permitted but not promoted.”

Social and collaborative learning can be a somewhat nebulous topic, especially as it is often discussed in terms of ideas and concepts. But there is an array of various tools and technologies that put these concepts into practice. The survey asked organizations the degree to which they are using these tools for learning, and it turns out there is a long way yet to go.

Even the most commonly used item, discussion forums, are only employed to even a moderate degree by 40% of organizations. For each tool, if it was being used at all, it was usually to a small extent. In almost every case, however, high-performing organizations are more likely to use these tools more than the overall group. The general population has caught up to high performers with older social technologies, such as videos and blogs, but has a long way to go with newer tools like content rating and comments (Figure 8).

**Figure 8: Use of Social Tools for Learning (Moderate, high and very high)**



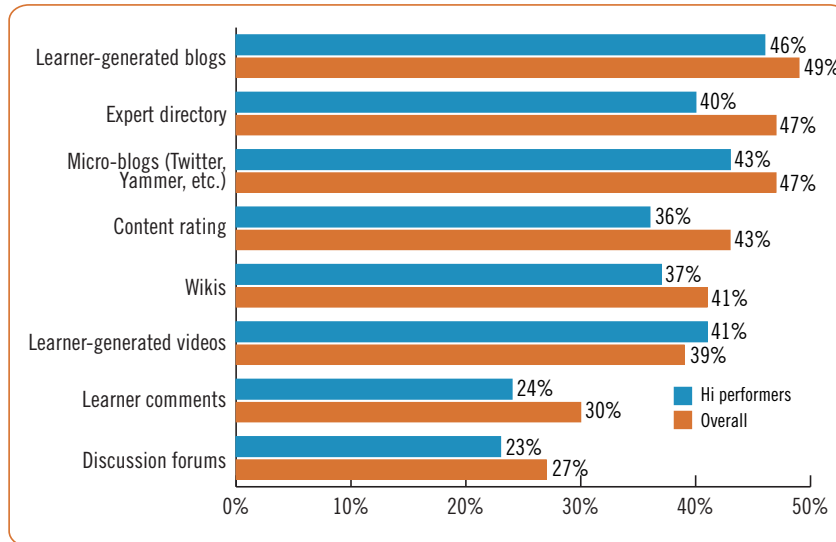
Source: Brandon Hall Group, 2014

Obviously, it makes no sense for any one of these tools to become the default learning modality, so it is not expected that any or all of them should be used to an extremely high extent. But the fact that so many companies are not using them at all is puzzling.

What makes this “non-use” really troubling is the missed opportunities it represents. In the early days of social media, many of these tools were looked down upon as frivolous or time-wasting. But as they (and the companies that use them) have matured, we see how clearly effective they have become (see Figure 9, following page).

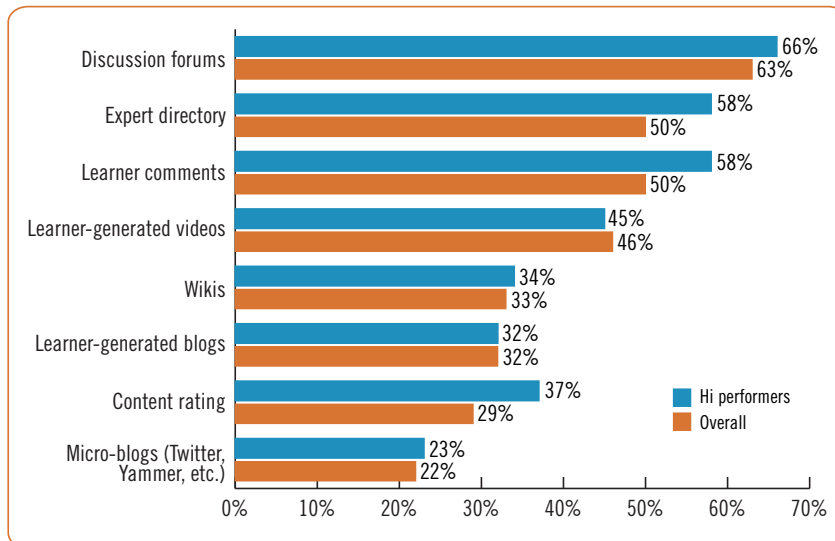
As an example, let’s look at expert directories. The ability for someone to quickly find a subject matter expert and connect with that person can be indispensable. Half of companies find expert directories to be very or extremely effective. However, 47% of companies do not use them. Yet tools like Yammer or Chatter are not considered nearly as effective, yet they are used just as much (see Figure 10, following page).

Figure 9: Use of Social Tools for Learning (Not at all)



Source: Brandon Hall Group, 2014

Figure 10: Effectiveness of Social Tools for Learning (Very or extremely)



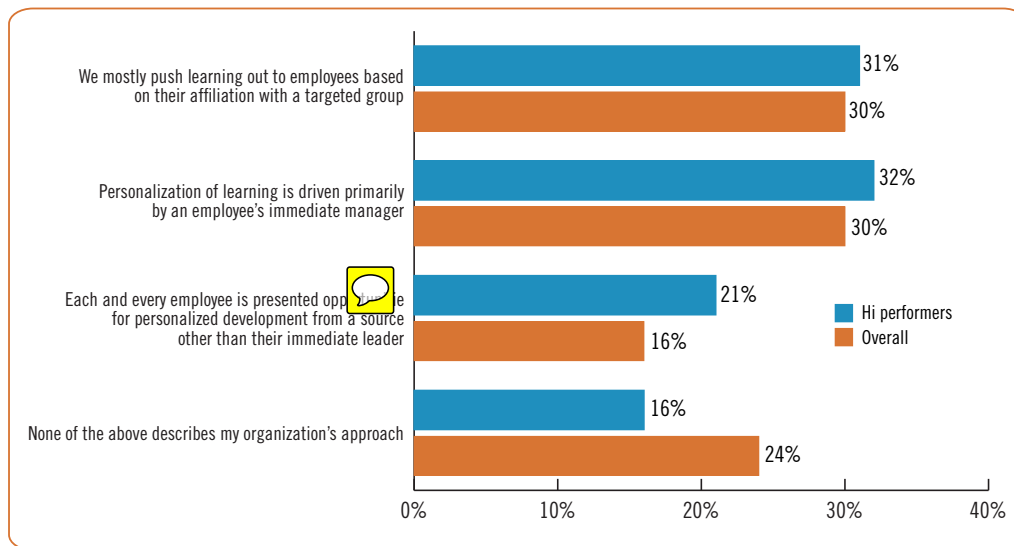
Source: Brandon Hall Group, 2014

This gets to one of the biggest challenges with social and collaborative learning. The most effective tools require the organization to give up a little bit of control. Enterprise micro-blogs are used because they are safe and controllable, yet they don't produce results much different than e-mail. Learner generated ratings, comments and discussions scare organizations, but are the most powerful ways to let learners teach each other.

## Contextualization

One of the hallmarks of any social media experience is the personalized nature of the interactions. It can come in the form of content recommended by peers or a recommendation engine, suggested connections, or even targeted advertising. The same is true for learning. A truly socialized learning experience is one that at least appears to be a personal one, where the learner is presented with content and connections customized to their personal strengths, weaknesses, job role and interests.

Figure 11: Organizational Use of Personalized Learning for Each Individual Employee

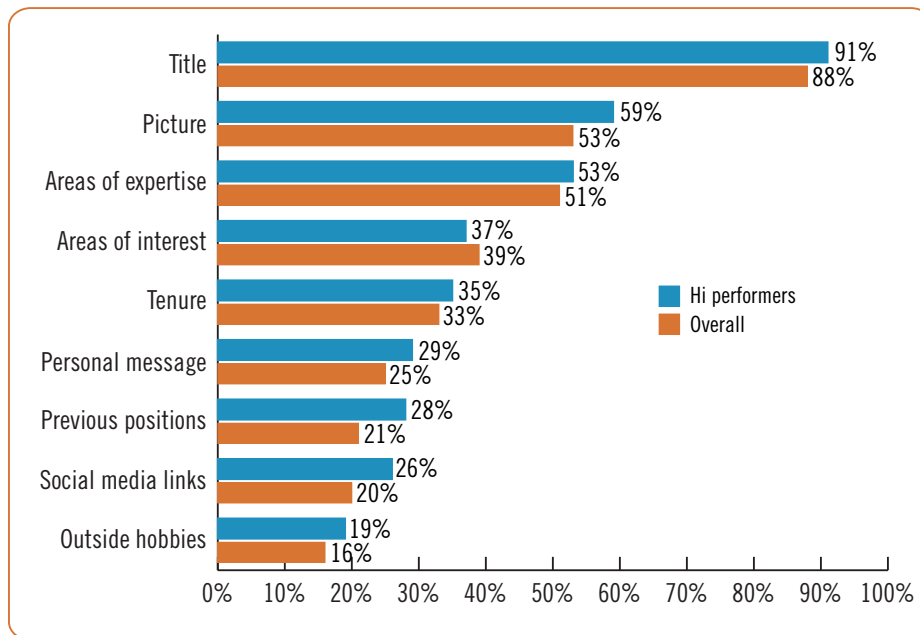


Source: Brandon Hall Group, 2014

In general, high performers are more likely to deliver a form of personalized learning, with 84% of them doing so, versus 76% of the overall population. They are also more likely to provide this personalization to all employees without relying on immediate supervisors. This means they are pulling in context from multiple sources to provide a relevant learning experience.

The best way to create a high level of contextualization is with in-depth learner profiles. Without a complete picture of who the learner is, it can be difficult to personalize their experience without input from the learner themselves or their supervisor each and every time the organization wants to deliver another piece of content.

Figure 12: Items Included in Learner Profiles



Source: Brandon Hall Group, 2014

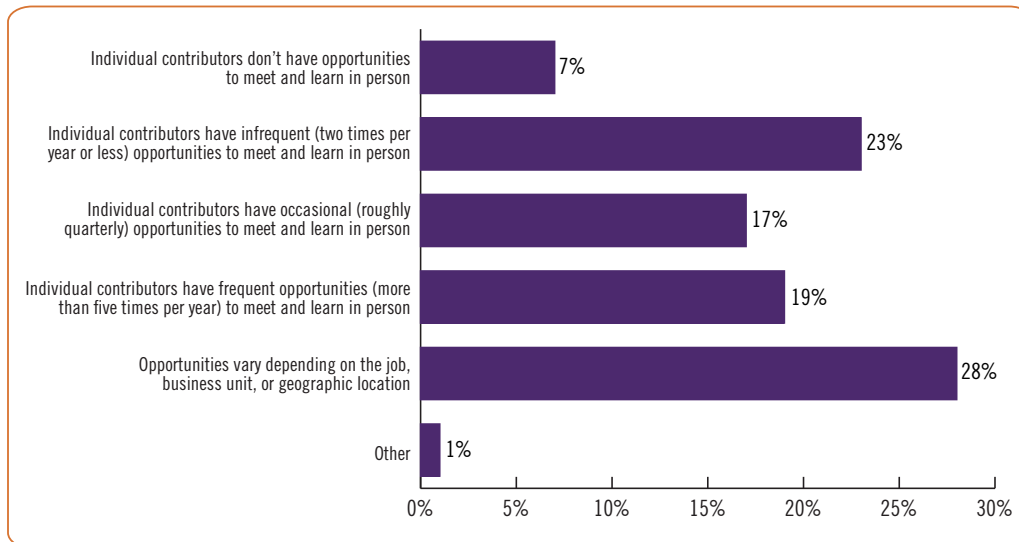
As shown in Figure 12 above, few organizations are building complete learner profiles. In fact, far less than half go any deeper than name, title, picture and areas of expertise. For the 49% of companies that do not include areas of expertise, it would be virtually impossible to create an expert directory that allows learners to find each other. As we saw previously, an expert directory can be one of the most effective social learning tools at an organization’s disposal

## Connections

At the heart of any social learning initiative is the desire to help people work together. Organizations have been fostering collaboration for decades in an effort to complete projects. How successful could an organization be if its people can’t work together? Learning is no different, yet organizations still sometimes treat learning and development like a kind of solitary journey for each learner to undertake on their own.

When it comes to project collaboration, organizations often provide physical places for employees to get together and work. The arsenal of virtual collaboration tools is also nearly endless. However, the same cannot be said when it comes to learning.

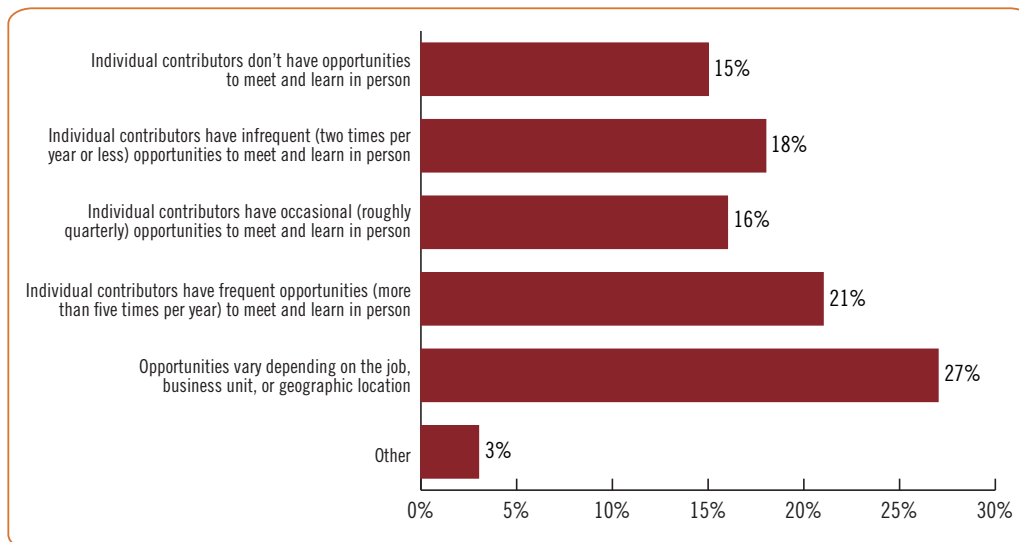
Figure 13: Frequency of Individual Contributors Getting Together for In-Person Learning



Source: Brandon Hall Group, 2014

Nearly one-third of companies (30%) say that in-person peer-to-peer learning opportunities are infrequent or non-existent (Figure 13, above). Less than one in five says that these opportunities come up more than five times in a year. This is an opportunity for social, collaborative learning that requires no technology investment whatsoever, and organizations are not taking advantage of it. The story is much the same for virtual peer-to-peer sessions as well, if not a little worse (Figure 14, below).

Figure 14: Frequency of Individual Contributors Getting Together for Virtual Learning

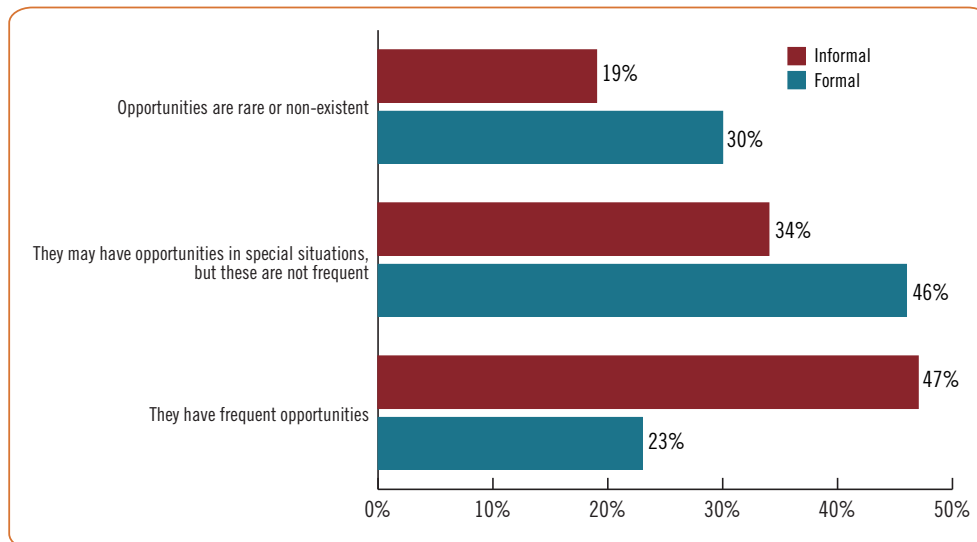


Source: Brandon Hall Group, 2014

15% percent of companies say that virtual peer-to-peer learning opportunities do not exist. Collaboration cannot occur if the organization does not provide the tools and means to facilitate it.

Our study found that a majority of organizations are presenting their learners with opportunities to learn from one another, whether it is informal knowledge (information or knowledge that is learned from experience but is not captured or organized into a structured course or learning activity) or formal (organizational information or knowledge that has been deliberately captured and organized into a structured course or learning activity).

**Figure 15: Frequency of Opportunities for Peer-to-Peer Informal or Formal Learning**

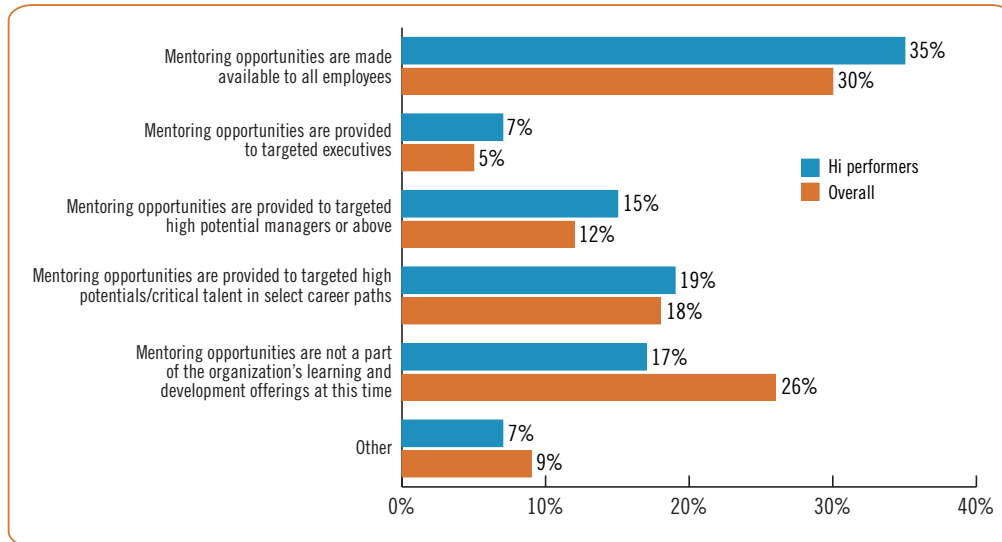


Source: Brandon Hall Group, 2014

While it is promising to see so much activity on the peer-to-peer learning front, the fact remains that nearly one in five companies provide no (or at best rare) opportunities for per-to-peer informal learning.

Another piece to the connection puzzle is coaching and mentoring. Often considered one of the most effective learning models, the coach/mentor relationship epitomizes all that is good about social learning. Even though it is a one-to-one relationship, it still carries social elements, especially when it comes to connecting a learner to the right person, and keeping those two connected on an ongoing basis. As you can see from Figure 16, on the following page, there remains plenty of opportunity for organizations to optimize coaching and mentoring programs.

Figure 16: Status of Organizations' Mentoring Programs



Source: Brandon Hall Group, 2014

## Measurement

As with all things learning, measurement plays a huge role in social learning. In fact, it is organizations' seeming inability to measure social learning that is preventing many from exploring it further. If they cannot track and measure its effectiveness and determine its ROI, they would rather just not do it.

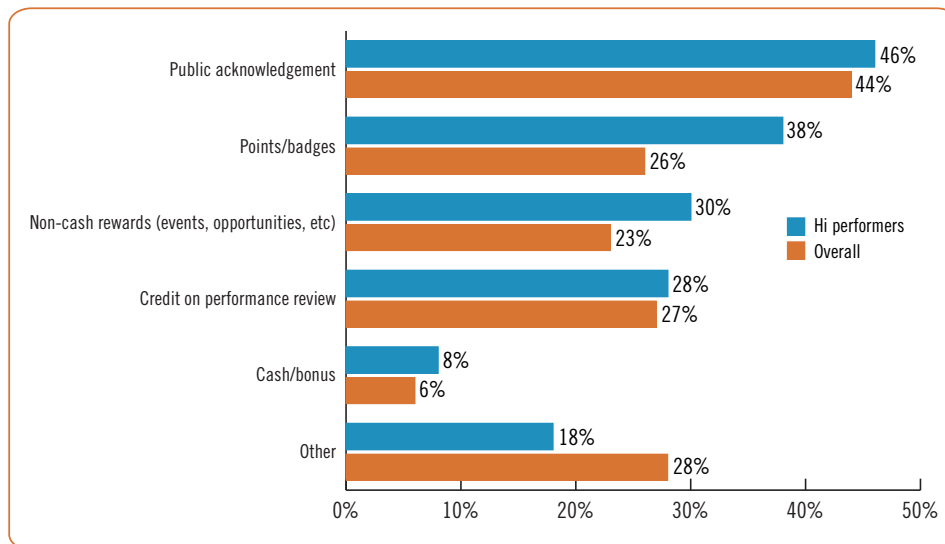
Before it can be measured, an organization needs to get people to actually participate. Very often, no incentive is necessary, as learners are often intrinsically motivated to collaborate and participate in social learning. However, as with any new technology initiative, it can be beneficial to nudge learners in the right direction in an effort to reach critical mass.

The most common incentive is public recognition for a job well done (Figure 17, following page). In a lot of instances, social media takes care of this incentive by itself. Recognition from peers for your contributions is part of what makes social media work in the first place. Still, nearly half of organizations make top-down recognition of participation in social learning. A bit more than one quarter actually use participation in social learning as criteria on performance reviews.

The standout here is around points and badges. As we talk more about gamification and how it fits in with learning, it becomes clearer that the most effective use of gaming (at least so far) is to award some sort of recognition of accomplishment. While this may not be a "game," it incorporates the motivating factor in games: achievement. Overall, about a quarter of companies use a system like this to reward social learning activity. However, high-performing organizations are nearly 50% more likely to use points or badges (see Figure 17, following page).



Figure 17: Incentives for Participating in Social/Collaborative Learning



Source: Brandon Hall Group, 2014

Once the tools are up and running, it does become necessary to measure whether or not they are working. What many companies fail to realize is that most of the metrics they currently use to measure learning are applicable to social learning as well.

The most striking thing in this data is the overall lack of measurement. There are only a few metrics companies are using to a high extent. Even learner satisfaction, arguably the easiest measurement to make, is not used at all by (32% of organizations). Another metric that seems like a no-brainer for social learning is the number of contributions a learner makes. Only half of companies are measuring this to any degree, and less than 10% use it to a high extent (see Figure 18, following page).

The other important takeaway is how much better high performers are at measuring social learning. They use every single metric in the list more than organizations in general, especially items such as business performance, completed learning experiences and employee engagement. In fact, learner satisfaction isn't even the number one metric for high performers; it is demonstration of skills or knowledge.

**Figure 18: Methods Used to Evaluate Effectiveness of Social/Collaborative Learning Efforts (High or Very High Extent)**

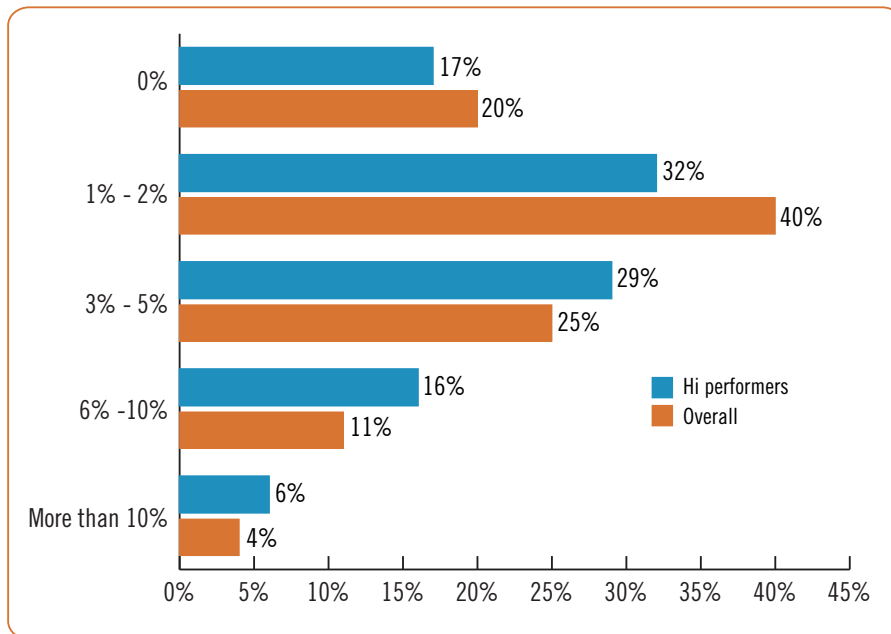
Method	Hi Performers	Overall
Demonstrations of skills or knowledge acquisition	27%	20%
Learner satisfaction	26%	24%
Changes to the number of completed learner experiences	22%	16%
Changes in employee engagement	22%	16%
Changes in business performance	21%	14%
Changes to engagement scores	20%	13%
Changes in product quality	18%	14%
Changes to compliance measures	17%	13%
Changes to knowledge flow	16%	13%
Changes to the size of talent gaps for critical roles	14%	10%
Number of contributions	12%	9%
Changes in time-to-productivity	12%	8%
Changes in employee turnover	12%	8%
Return on investment per program	8%	6%
Changes to the number of learner requests	5%	7%

Source: Brandon Hall Group, 2014

## Budget

A key concern for an organization undertaking any learning initiative is the cost. With social learning being as much conceptual as it is practical, it can be difficult to assign actual budget values. The survey asked organizations to estimate what they are spending on social and collaborative initiatives as a percentage of their overall budget.

**Figure 19: Percentage of Learning Budget Spent on Social/Collaborative Learning Initiatives**

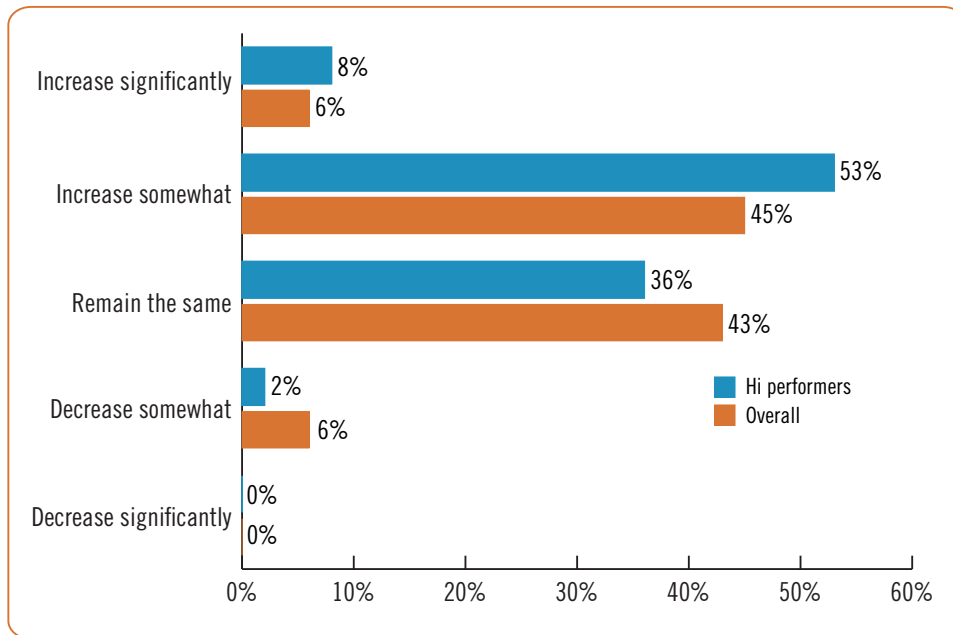


Source: Brandon Hall Group, 2014

Currently, these initiatives take up only a small portion of the overall budget, although 15% of companies are spending more than 6% in this area. High-performers are making more investment in social learning, as 51% are spending at least 3% of their budget on it, compared to 40% of companies overall. Just as the interest and importance of social learning is going to increase, so too is the investment.

Just about half (51%) of companies overall expect their investment to increase, with 6% saying it will increase significantly. However, 61% of high performers say they are going to increase social learning spending, including 8% saying it will increase significantly (see Figure 20, following page).

Figure 20: Anticipated Change in Spending on Social/Collaborative Learning Over the Next Year




Source: Brandon Hall Group, 2014

## Conclusion

Social collaboration is occurring among your organization’s learners right now, regardless of whether any platforms or tools are in place. More often than not, the adoption of these tools comes from the ground up, where a group or team needs a way to communicate and share, so they use whatever they can get their hands on. Companies have an opportunity to maximize this potential by providing tools and platforms to make the collaboration easier, better and more effective. The irony is that one of the biggest fears around these tools is the loss of control and potential misuse. But by not doing anything, companies are fostering a Wild West atmosphere that ensures zero control. By deploying the tools as a function, learning can then manage, track and measure the types of learning interactions.

The takeaway is that companies cannot continue to ignore these tools as fads or timewasters. The brand names and features may come and go, but the concepts will not. Collaboration is an indispensable part of learning and companies now have a multitude of tools at their disposal to facilitate it.

Some of the key considerations for social and collaborative learning include:

- **Start.** Start simply, use what works. Discussion forums are an easy, effective way to get learners connected and sharing. The same goes for allowing learners to comment on or rate learning content.
- **Invest.** Find at least some room in the budget to explore these possibilities. It does not take much and it is something your learners are asking for. In reality, a lot of these features can be found within an LMS, which already has its own budget allocation.
- **Connect.** Provide opportunities for learners to connect with one another and with mentors and coaches. Having tools in place to facilitate these connections ensures that they will take place more frequently and effectively.
- **Measure.** Do not be intimidated by new technologies. Just because you have found a new way to enhance learning does not mean you need all new measurements. It is still learning, so use what has been working for you. Then determine any new metrics that may be used 

## Research Methodology



### Client-Centered Business Goals

# Research Methodology

Leverage the outputs of our methodology to optimize and sustain your business performance.

#### Analytics-Based Reports and Tools

After verifying our position internally, in alignment with scholarly research, and the market and completing rigorous peer reviews, our position is documented and published, made available to our members, in the form of reports, tools and online searchable databases.



#### Evaluation of Business and Talent Landscape

We study current trends to hypothesize about how they might influence future events and what affect those events is likely to have on your business.



#### Quantitative Surveys

To test our hypothesis, we gather empirical insights through formal and informal surveys completed by Executives, Chief Human Resources Officers, VPs of Talent and other business leaders as well as HR, Learning and Talent Leaders and employees.

#### Qualitative Interviews

To check assumptions generated from surveys and to add context to the empirical survey data, we talk to Executives, Chief HR Officers, VPs of Talent and other business leaders as well as HR, Learning and Talent Leaders and employees.



#### Market Testing

We fortify and validate our initial findings, leading practices and high impact processes within the analyst environment, our own Advisory Board and select other clients and prospects that offer fair assessment of the practicality and usability of our findings, practices, and processes. Again we add new perspectives as appropriate before readying the research for publication.

#### Emergent Trends

After studying and analyzing all collected data, we see and document patterns emerging within high performing companies. We create initial drafts of our findings, leading practice and high impact processes.



#### Expert Resident Knowledge

Our quantitative and qualitative findings are shared within our internal research community and rapidly debated in peer review sessions to test validity and practicality.

#### Scholarly Reviews

We study and analyze renowned academic research comparing and contrasting their findings to our own and again engage in rapid debate to ensure our findings and analysis stand the tests of business usability. New perspectives are shapes and added as appropriate.



This study was developed after collecting data and analyzing the practices of high-performing organizations (HiPOs) and their lower-performing counterparts. For the purposes of this study, HiPOs are organizations whose revenue as well as a majority of key performance indicators have gone up over the past year. Our methodology is a multi-tiered approach that included an online survey of a wide variety of organizations across a broad set of industries and sizes. The survey was conducted in April and May of 2014 and received 254 responses. The four tiers included:

- **Empirical Data:** In April and May of 2014, we garnered a total of 254 responses to an online survey from a wide variety of organizations across a broad set of industries and sizes.
- **Qualitative Interviews:** The empirical data provided the foundation for interviews with solutions providers, senior learning professionals and subject matter experts.
- **Refereed-Research:** Our empirical and qualitative research results served as the backdrop for an intensive review and comparison analysis between our research results and those of refereed published research from academic and business institutions.
- **Resident Knowledge:** Finally, we drew upon more than 150 years of collective knowledge within our own resident analyst community.

### About Brandon Hall Group

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Brandon Hall Group is a HCM research and advisory services firm that provides insights around key performance areas, including Learning and Development, Talent Management, Leadership Development, Talent Acquisition and Human Resources.

With more than 10,000 clients globally and 20 years of delivering world-class research and advisory services, Brandon Hall Group is focused on developing research that drives performance in emerging and large organizations, and provides strategic insights for executives and practitioners responsible for growth and business results.

At the core of our offerings is a Membership Program that combines research, benchmarking and unlimited access to data and analysts. The Membership Program offers insights and best practices to enable executives and practitioners to make the right decisions about people, processes, and systems, coalesced with analyst advisory services which aim to put the research into action in a way that is practical and efficient.

#### The Value of Membership

The Brandon Hall Group Membership Program encompasses comprehensive research resources and an array of advisory services. Our Membership Program provides:

- **Cutting-Edge Information** – Our rigorous approach for conducting research is constantly evolving and up-to-date, providing your organization with current and future trends, as well as practical insights.
- **Actionable Research** – Your membership includes advisory services and tools that are research-driven and provide you a breakthrough approach to addressing immediate challenges and opportunities inside your organization.
- **Customizable Support** – Whether you are an executive or entry-level practitioner, our research and analyst insights can be leveraged at an individual level and across the entire organization. We realize that every organization has unique needs, so we provide multiple analyst and research access points.
- **Community of Peers** – We realize the value of connecting with your peers and being part of a community that is focused on continuous improvement. Your membership provides you with personal connections to fellow professionals.
- **Unlimited Access** – Every member of your team has the ability to utilize research, best practices, and advisory services when they need it most.

To learn more about Brandon Hall Group, please call us at (561) 865-5017 or email us at [success@brandonhall.com](mailto:success@brandonhall.com).