



High-Impact Learning Practices

Executive Summary

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Overview

Since 2002, we have studied the best practices in the organization, management and governance of corporate learning and development (L&D). In 2003, we published our first report, entitled *The High-Impact Learning Organization*¹, and then we advanced that research with a new study in 2008. Our mission throughout this effort has been to identify the specific dimensions of corporate training that define and create high levels of business impact.

As part of our ongoing high-impact learning research, we began to notice certain potentially disruptive trends in the evolution of the learning functions themselves, including a growing recognition of the:

- Importance of informal learning in organizations,
- Power of new technologies to both deepen and hasten the flow of information across organizations;
- Changing needs and expectations for learning on the part of new generations of employees;
- Increasing speed at which the human capital needs of the organization are changing; and,
- Increasing inability of current practices to solve all of these new challenges.

These emerging trends raised fundamental questions about the basic operational practices of learning departments. We realized that the shift in thinking (which these changes represent) would require a deeper approach. Most training departments struggle with current practices,

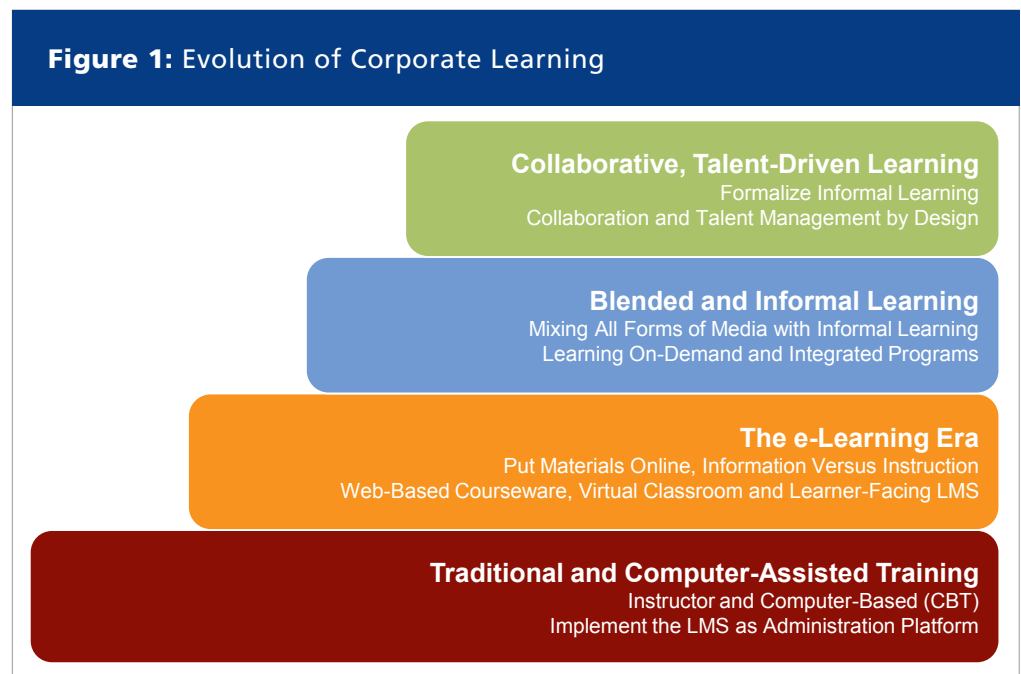
¹ For more information, *The High-Impact Learning Organization: WhatWorks® in the Management, Governance and Operations of Modern Corporate Training*, Bersin & Associates / Josh Bersin, May 2008. Available to research members at www.bersin.com/library or for purchase at www.bersin.com/highimpact.

**KEY POINT**

Corporate learning is entering a new era – one of social, collaborative and talent-driven learning.

such as e-learning development²; how will they handle new practices, such as using social software tools³ to support social learning⁴?

Corporate learning is entering a new era – one of social, collaborative and talent-driven learning. Today's workers still need formal training that is built around specific problems and talent needs; however, they also need the availability of a "learning environment" in which they can find information, collaborate and build their own learning plans. The learning organization must go beyond the disciplines of building content for use online – we must provide context and pathways through which people can learn. We must help the organization to be both better learners and better creators of learning.



Source: Bersin & Associates, 2009.

² Ibid.

³ For more information, *Enterprise Social Software 2009: Facts, Practical Analysis, Trends and Provider Profiles*, Bersin & Associates / David Mallon, September 2008. Available to research members at www.bersin.com/library or for purchase at www.bersin.com/socialsoftware.

⁴ For more information, *Social Networks for Enterprise Learning and Talent Management: A Primer*, Bersin & Associates / David Mallon, June 2008. Available to research members at www.bersin.com/library.

Organizations must expand the scope and purpose of the learning function to focus first and foremost on developing deep expertise within the company, as well as improving the organization's ability to adapt in the face of constant change. These goals are over and above its operational and tactical responsibilities. Training departments cannot simply exist to solve human performance problems, nor are they often the best source of such solutions. The internal currency of today's companies is knowledge; the mandate of the modern learning organization must be to stand as a center of excellence for the creation, acquisition and flow of knowledge in all its forms.

So, as today's high-impact learning organizations evolve, what will they look like? What must they do to sustain high impact?

This study attempts to paint a picture of a specific kind of high-impact learning organization – one that has evolved to better meet the evolving challenges of today's changing business world. The applicable measures and dimensions are the same. What is different, however, is a shifting perspective on the role of the learning function, a dedicated focus on the use of certain forward-looking practices over other more-traditional ones, and an associated rearrangement of priorities and resources.

The modern high-impact learning organization recognizes that most learning takes place in subtle and informal ways. The content, technology and formal design processes currently in use do not always fit into the knowledge pathways that take place in the organization itself. So, in response, modern learning organizations are rethinking their perspectives, processes and approaches to best support the natural flow of organizational knowledge.

To help corporate training, HR and business leaders understand the modern world of corporate learning and its evolving practices, this study contains four major sections:

1. The **Bersin & Associates Enterprise Learning Framework®⁵**– A clear architecture designed to help organizations understand how to design and build high-impact, modern learning solutions that meet the needs of today’s highly networked organizations;
2. A new *mandate* for **Modern Enterprise Learning Organizations**;
3. The **Modern Enterprise Learning Index** – A set of 10 indicators of overall readiness on the part of learning organizations for the transition to the next generation of high-impact learning; and,
4. The Bulk of This Report – A systematic tour of the **High-Impact Learning Practices** of the modern learning function, covering all elements of the Bersin & Associates Enterprise Learning Framework (including organization and governance, programs, approaches, disciplines, technologies, culture, and learning architecture) that are indicative of the modern high-impact learning organization.

As we explain in the 2008 *High-Impact Learning Organization study*⁶, becoming a high-impact learning organization is a journey – one that never ends and for which the targets are always moving. Organizations that succeed develop a long-term roadmap, which they communicate throughout the organization. They then use this roadmap to implement specific year-by-year initiatives that take them further toward greater business impact. As each year progresses, your company’s business, technology and external markets change – forcing you to continuously reevaluate your roadmap over time. Consider this report supplemental material to help you keep on the path today and to prepare for the needs of tomorrow.



KEY POINT

Becoming a high-impact learning organization is a journey.

⁵ For more information, *The Enterprise Learning Framework: A Modern Approach to Corporate Training*, Bersin & Associates / Josh Bersin and David Mallon, May 2009. Available to research members at www.bersin.com/library.

⁶ For more information, *The High-Impact Learning Organization: WhatWorks® in the Management, Governance and Operations of Modern Corporate Training*, Bersin & Associates / Josh Bersin, May 2008.

Key Questions Answered

In this research area, we seek to answer these questions.

Responding to Transformative Change / Remaining Relevant

- How can the L&D department evolve its people, processes and technologies to better keep up with the needs of the business?
- How is the role / purpose of the learning function evolving?
- How are new technologies changing the expectations that employees have of the organization with regard to learning, knowledge and development?
- How can the learning function improve competitive advantage by building the deep expertise of the organization?
- How can the learning function support the organization's learning agility – the ability to learn from the past and adapt in the face of transformative change?

Organization and Governance

- What are the implications of transitioning to the modern learning organization for the organization and governance of the learning function?
- How can organizations measure their informal learning efforts?

Learning Programs and Audiences

- How to design and build high-impact, modern learning solutions that meet the needs of today's highly networked organizations (including best-practice examples)?
- How do we best meet the learning program needs of the organization going forward through the creation of holistic learning environments instead of discrete programs?

- How can learning organizations best meet the needs of the new generation of workers?
- What does the learning organization need to do to ensure that its offerings are as targeted and personalized to the needs of their audiences as possible?

Learning Approaches

- What are the approaches that are available to the modern learning organization? How can they be categorized? How might they be used?
- What is informal learning? What does it look like? How can it be supported?
- What should be the role of the learning organization in social and collaborative learning?
- How do we harness the power of the organization to support its own learning needs?
- What does the next generation of blended learning (incorporating informal learning approaches) look like?
- What should a learning organization do to begin creating an informal learning strategy and set of offerings?
- What does it mean for an organization to “formalize informal learning?”
- How can a learning organization know if it is ready to support informal approaches?

Operations (Disciplines, Processes, Roles)

- What disciplines must be mastered in order to support informal learning approaches, including on-demand, social and embedded?
- What disciplines must be mastered to be a center of excellence for knowledge in the organization?

- What content development models are best-suited for building modern learning solutions? How must these processes change to support informal learning approaches, including on-demand, social and embedded?
- What roles / skills sets are necessary to support informal learning approaches, including on-demand, social and embedded?

Tools and Technologies

- What new technologies are necessary to support informal learning approaches, including on-demand, social and embedded?
- What is the role of existing tools (such as LMS) in supporting informal learning approaches, including on-demand, social and embedded?

Learning Culture

- How does the organization's culture affect its ability to evolve and endure?
- What role can L&D play in nurturing an agile learning culture?
- How are the organization's willingness to share knowledge and reflect on past mistakes critical indicators of its overall ability to support modern high-impact learning?

Learning Architectures

- What is the purpose and function of the learning architecture? How is one created? What are its components?
- How does the learning architecture help the organization to make learning decisions?

Methodology for This Study

As with all of our in-depth research, the goal of this research area is to continuously identify actionable, pragmatic solutions that drive business results. In this study, we used our *WhatWorks*®⁷ methodology to look at specific best practices that significantly improve business results.

Above all else, this study should be seen as an extension of our *High-Impact Learning Organization*⁸ research. Much of the data collected from that study informs the analysis in this one.

For this specific report, the research involved three major phases:

- First, we surveyed many thousands of companies and identified measures that characterize the modern high-impact learning organizations;
- Second, we interviewed many organizations to understand their structures, challenges, best practices and innovative solutions, as well as to validate and refine our identified measures; and,
- Third, we analyzed this data and discussed it internally (as well as with our clients) to benchmark this information against other industry research we conduct.

The Modern Enterprise Learning Index

In this study, we will introduce in detail 10 new measures – some very similar and / or directly related to the *High-Impact Learning Organization*⁹ measures and some related only indirectly. The purpose of these new measures is to gauge readiness for a particular kind of

⁷ Bersin & Associates' proprietary "*WhatWorks*® research methodology" uses the concepts of "measures" (outcomes) and "dimensions" (the factors that may or may not contribute to these outcomes) to understand best practices, trends and solutions.

⁸ For more information, *The High-Impact Learning Organization: WhatWorks® in the Management, Governance and Operations of Modern Corporate Training*, Bersin & Associates / Josh Bersin, May 2008.

⁹ For more information, *The High-Impact Learning Organization: WhatWorks® in the Management, Governance and Operations of Modern Corporate Training*, Bersin & Associates / Josh Bersin, May 2008.

high-impact learning, as defined in our report on the *Bersin & Associates Enterprise Learning Framework*¹⁰ and accomplished by something we call, the “modern enterprise learning organization.”

Multidimensional Analysis

How did we capture these measures? We developed an in-depth survey that was sent to approximately 40,000 training, HR and business leaders. Using a wide variety of questions, we asked individuals to rate themselves according to the modern enterprise learning measures and on related practices. We then carefully cleaned the data and eliminated answers from vendors (or other individuals who were not representative of their organizations), which produced 798 organizations to profile. This database of 798 organizations (and its respective more than one million responses) comprises the information used in this report.

After collecting this information and comparing the various practice-related data points against the 10 index measures, we used a variety of statistical tools to understand which factors create which outcomes. This multidimensional analysis provides us with the guidance for the best practices discussed in this report. If you read this report and think of an issue that we may not have discussed, please call us. We continue to build and evolve this benchmarking database over time – and would welcome the opportunity to understand how we can help you profile and improve your organization.

¹⁰ For more information, *The Enterprise Learning Framework: A Modern Approach to Corporate Training*, Bersin & Associates / Josh Bersin and David Mallon, May 2009.

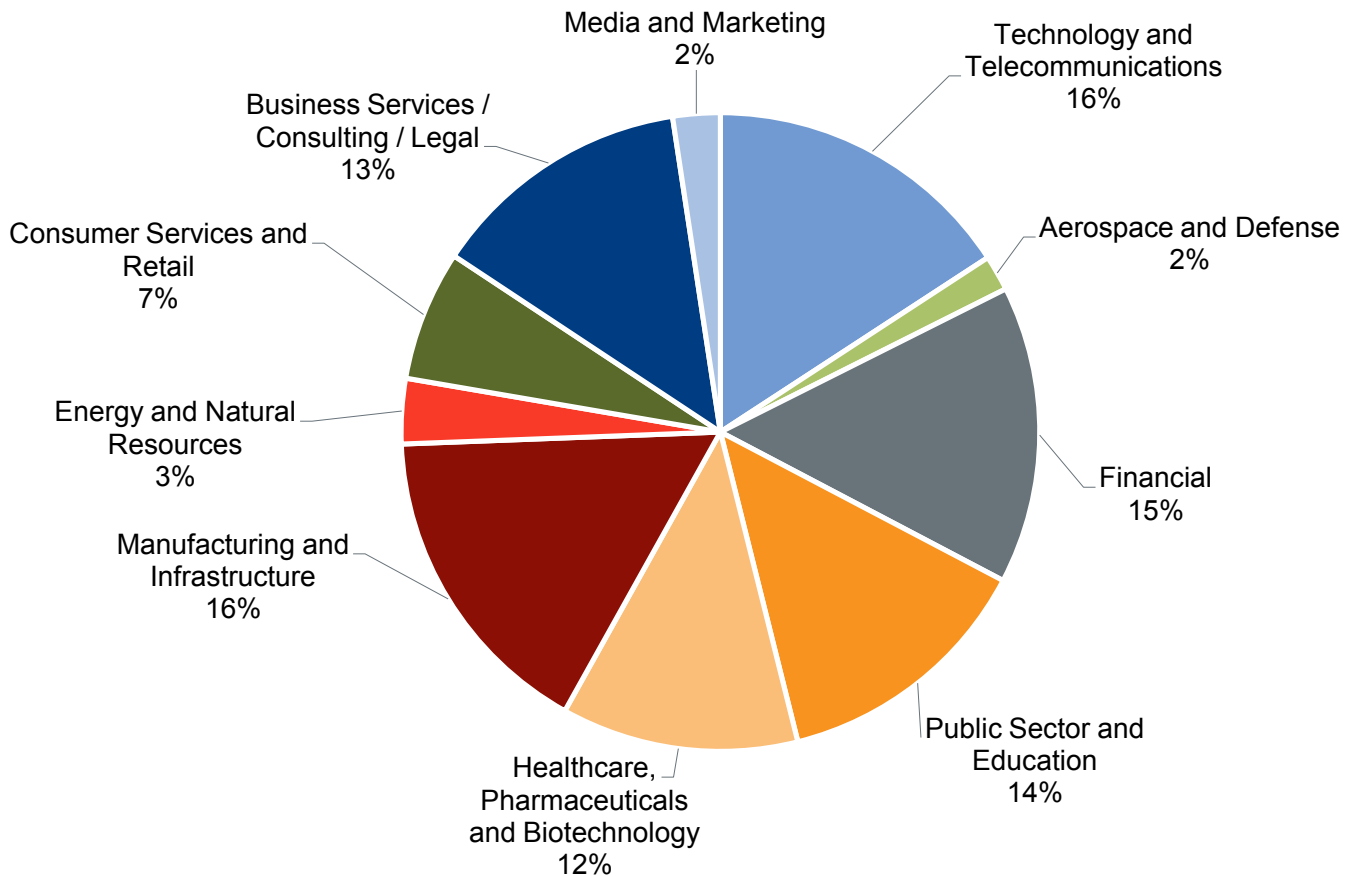
Demographics of the Study

This research was conducted from the fall of 2008 to the spring of 2009, and included in-depth interviews and a comprehensive survey delivered to a subset of our research respondents.

Industries

The sample represents a broad range of industries as shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2: Industry Breakdown of Respondents

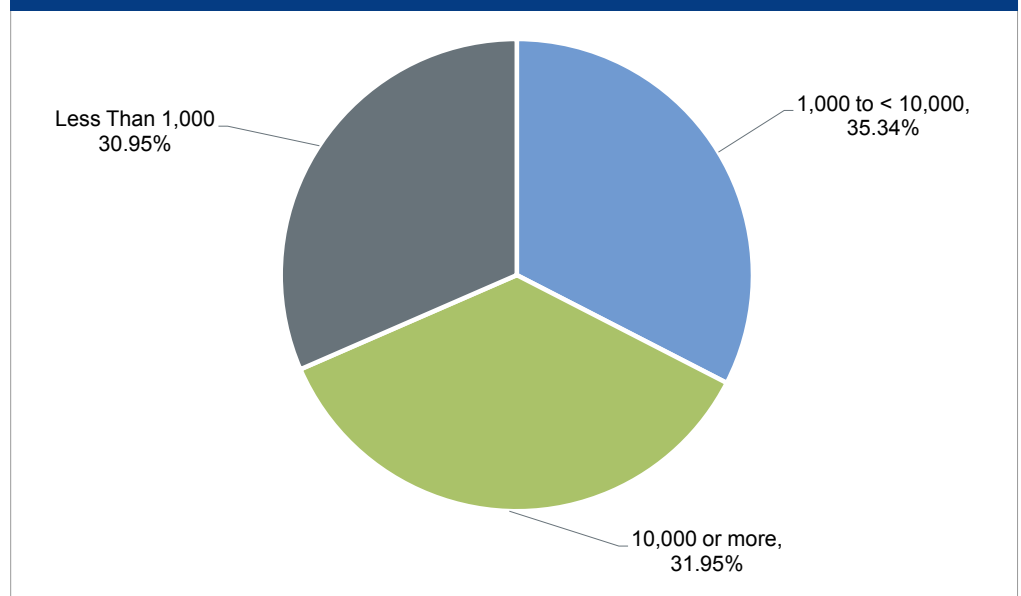


Source: Bersin & Associates, 2009.

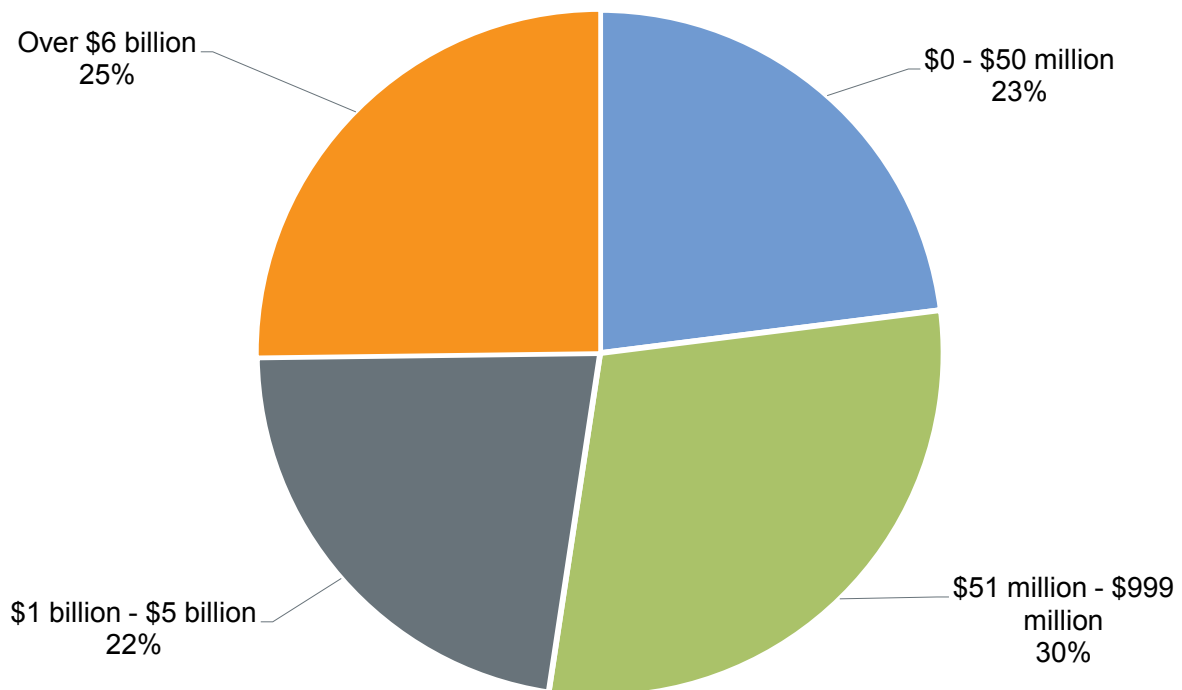
Breakdown by Organization Size

This research represents a wide range of organization sizes. We carefully cleaned the data, so that a small number of very large organizations did not overly bias the survey. We believe this report well represents organizations with 500 or more employees. In most cases, the results we found were not affected by organization size at all, showing that high-impact learning practices are universal across organizations of any size.

Figure 3: Respondent Size by Learner Population



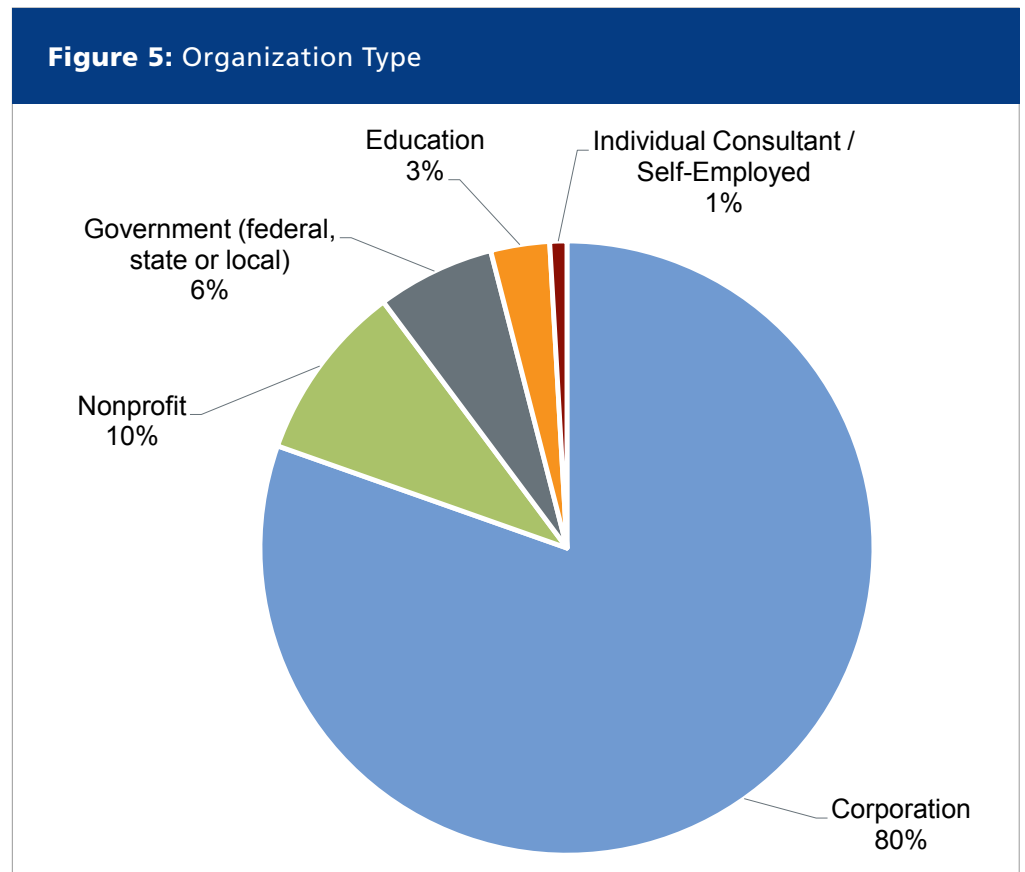
Source: Bersin & Associates, 2009.

Figure 4: Respondent Size by Revenue

Source: Bersin & Associates, 2009.

Organization Type

As with all of our research, our focus is on the corporate, nonprofit and government markets.



Source: Bersin & Associates, 2009.

Regarding This Research

We will be presenting highlights of this research at webinars and other events¹¹ throughout the coming year. If you are interested in benchmarking your organization against the best practices developed in this report, please contact us. Our *WhatWorks*® benchmarking¹² service will provide your organization with the data, recommendations and strategic insights to determine the best course of action to adopt the *High-Impact Learning Practices*® of the modern learning function.

Come Visit with Us

We are continuing to expand our workshop and events program to bring research and best practices to your organization. In particular, we encourage you to attend our yearly research conference, IMPACT: The Business of Talent®¹³. We hope you will join us – and many other senior HR and L&D executives as they share their experiences and best practices with you.

Join Our Research Membership Program

Did you get a lot of valuable information from this report? If you like our research and would like to have complete access to more than 10,000 pages of research, case studies, analyses and bulletins, please consider joining our research membership program. Research members have access to all Bersin & Associates research and advisory services, as well as special discounts to our events and workshops. You can learn more by visiting www.bersin.com/membership or calling us at (561) 455-0622.

¹¹ For more information on our upcoming events and webinars, please visit www.bersin.com/newsevents.

¹² For more information on our benchmarking services, please visit www.bersin.com/benchmarking.

¹³ For more information about our annual conference, please visit www.bersin.com/impact.

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About Us

Bersin & Associates is the only research and advisory consulting firm focused solely on *WhatWorks*® research in enterprise learning and talent management. With more than 25 years of experience in enterprise learning, technology and HR business processes, Bersin & Associates provides actionable, research-based services to help learning and HR managers and executives improve operational effectiveness and business impact.

Bersin & Associates research members gain access to a comprehensive library of best practices, case studies, benchmarks and in-depth market analyses designed to help executives and practitioners make fast, effective decisions. Member benefits include: in-depth advisory services, access to proprietary webcasts and industry user groups, strategic workshops, and strategic consulting to improve operational effectiveness and business alignment. More than 3,500 organizations in a wide range of industries benefit from Bersin & Associates research and services.

Bersin & Associates can be reached at <http://www.bersin.com> or at (510) 654-8500.

About This Research

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