

LEARNING ORGANISATIONS AND LEARNING UNIVERSITIES

Bianca PASCU^{1*}, Florin LUNGU^{2*}, Ilie Dănuț POPA³

1 Department for Continuing Education, Technical University of Cluj-Napoca, România, bianca.pascu@staff.utcluj.ro

2 Faculty of Industrial Engineering, Robotics and Production Management, Technical University of Cluj-Napoca, Romania, florin.lungu@mis.utcluj

3 Faculty of Road Vehicles, Mechatronics and Mechanics, Technical University of Cluj-Napoca, Romania, popa_iliuta@yahoo.com

** Correspondence: bianca.pascu@staff.utcluj.ro, florin.lungu@mis.utcluj.ro*

Abstract: At a time when lifelong learning is encouraged, promoted and even rewarded, the movement initiated in 1970 by Peter Senge, a professor at MIT Sloan School of Management, is up to date. Since 1990, he has written a series of books about this phenomenon embraced by many leading companies around the world. He created a true ideology and changed the way management and teamwork are understood. 30 years after its publication in 2020, Peter Senge's executive assistant officially announced that more than 2 million copies of the book "The Fifth discipline, the Art and practice of learning organizations" had been sold. (Örtenblad, 2020)

Keywords: learning organisations, learning universities, lifelong learning, continuing education

1 INTRODUCTION

The essence of the book "Fifth discipline, the Art and practice of learning organizations" is the following: "In the long run, the only sustainable source of competitive advantage is the capacity of your organization to learn faster than the competition." A learning organization is an organization that continuously expands its ability to create its own future. (Senge, 1990)

The time when a manager thinks for the whole team and conveys the tasks that need to be done to achieve the company goals is over. The business of those who still have this outdated way of thinking are doomed to failure, however brilliant those ideas may be.

2 THE FIVE DISCIPLINES

The five disciplines highlighted by Peter Senge in his book "The Fifth Discipline", written in 1990 and repeated in his books and many subsequent studies are as follows:

1. Personal Mastery - it is the discipline that continually clarifies and deepens personal vision, focusing energies, and developing patience to see objective reality. It is the cornerstone of a learning organization.
2. Mental Models - these are assumptions, generalizations, or images that influence us consciously or not.

3. Building shared vision - the ability of an organization to create a common vision for the future, the ability to unite people around a common identity and destiny.
4. Team Learning - it begins with dialog, through the ability of members to let go of assumptions and enter into collective thinking. The IQ of a team can exceed the IQ of the individuals in the team.
5. Systems Thinking - it integrates the other disciplines and transforms them into a single organism.
(Senge, 1990)

According to a study published in the Journal of Organizational Culture, Communications and conflict, (Fillion, Koffi, & Booto Ekionea, 2015) the members of a learning organization must master and apply all the principles stated in the book "The five disciplines " by Peter Senge. The authors of the study believe that some organizations call themselves "learning organizations," but apply only the principles that are easier to understand and accept. They also believe that some organizations not only do not apply the principles but are afraid to apply them.

What we should find in a learning organization is very well summarized by Hershey H. Friedman, Linda W. Friedman and Simcha Pollack, in the study "Transforming a University from a Teaching Organization to a Learning Organization":

- Awareness of the external environment – you always need to know where the competition is
- A culture of learning – the belief that individuals can change the environment
- A common vision - in which the individual is encouraged to take risks
- Learning from past experiences and mistakes – personal and other

people's experiences are the best ways to learn.

- Willingness to experiment and take risks, tolerance for mistakes. Error is not encouraged, but is not punished, but is regarded as an experience from which one can learn and not repeat it.
- Concern and respect for employees, accepting diversity that can generate ideas.
- An infrastructure that enables the fast and direct exchange of ideas, information, and knowledge
- Team learning where team members help, respect, and trust each other.
- Use of common knowledge
- Commitment to lifelong learning
- Adapting to change, the ability to renew, regenerate and revitalize an organization.
(Friedman, Weiser Friedman, & Pollack, 2003)
- the ability to generate change.

The idea of a "learning organization" sounds good for many organizations and they believe that they can become such a type of organization from one day to the other. But this takes a lot of time to learn and implement what have been learned.

To determine whether an organization is a learning organization, David A. Garvin, Amy C. Edmondson and Francesca Gino showed in their article that appeared in the Harvard Business Review how to quantify this (Garvin, Edmondson, & Gino, 2008). First, they identified three cornerstones of a learning organization, as well as their characteristics:

1. A supportive learning environment where employees feel safe when they contradict others, ask naive questions, make mistakes, and submit their point of view. They also

- accept the ideas of others, take risks, do test and take time to review existing procedures.
2. A concrete learning process involves a team that has a procedure for generating, collecting, interpreting and disseminating information, experimenting with new offers, gathering information about the competition, customers and technological novelties in the field, identifying and solving problems and developing employees' skills.
 3. A leadership that encourages learning, which is open to accepting other points of view, emphasizes the importance of taking time to identify problems, transferring knowledge and reflection, which is involved in active questioning and listening.

The three foundation stones complement each other.

David A. Garvin, Amy C. Edmondson and Francesca Gino created a tool, an online questionnaire to determine whether an organization is a learning organization or to what extent it is, and what relationships are with the factors that influence learning within the organization. The questionnaire can be accessed at <http://los.hbs.edu/> (Edmondson, Garvin, & Gino, 2008).

The results of the employees can be compared to each other or compared to employee results from other departments of the company or other internal or international structures of the company or can be compared with the reference scores at the end of the questionnaire. The results can also be compared to the results obtained by the managers of the organization. Within the same organization things can be seen differently within different departments, locations, or positions. Responses can be influenced by the individual's personality and the microenvironment in which they operate.

The results obtained can also be compared to expectations and a SWOT analysis can be made. There can be identified weaknesses and strengths, or aspects that can be improved.

3 THE ADULT WHO LEARNS IN THE LEARNING ORGANIZATION

There are adults who learn throughout their lives, and there are learning organizations. There is a fine line between the two: a learning organization cannot exist without adults that learn. As Peter Senge and many others who have taken over and developed his ideas stated, an organization's IQ can exceed the average IQ of its members, precisely because of the joint effort put into a common cause that all participants believe in. Most likely, the adult who learns cannot find his place and identify with any type of organization, except the one that encourages and supports him, that understands the need for and importance of learning.

As Senge stated, a child does not need to be taught to talk, to walk, children come programmed from birth with an unwavering desire to learn. This desire fades over time due to society. Likewise, a new employee has in the first days or weeks the desire and curiosity to gather as much information as possible. After a while, his curiosity disappears. Most of the time this happens because it is not encouraged by the organization, on the contrary, there can even be some concern if mistakes occurring.

4 LEARNING UNIVERSITIES

One type of organization is the university. The university is different from a private company because its main purpose isn't to generate profit, but to create and transfer knowledge. Its main assets are not or should not be buildings and office spaces, but the quality of the people inside, the human capital, which cannot be quantified in figures immediately, but

only by the results obtained from research or its graduates, a few years after graduation.

The goal of a university is to increase its prestige in order to draw as many quality students as possible, the best teachers and useful resources. The transformation of a university into a learning university may be the chance for survival or development for some of the universities. (Bui & Yehuda, 2013)

Some universities such as Cambridge, Harvard or Oxford have sufficient resources, both human and technological, but there are universities that are struggling for a competitive advantage.

In the chapter "Universities as learning organizations: Internationalization and innovation" the authors identified four reasons why some universities cannot be learning organizations:

1. Becoming a learning organization is a long process, not a fact, and no university can call itself a learning organization without going throughout this process
2. Team learning is not very well developed in the university environment, which prevents universities from becoming learning organizations.
3. To become learning organizations, universities need to have visionary leaders that need to share vision among employees and create a supportive learning environment
4. Organizational and social culture can be impediments.

(Bui & Yehuda, 2013)

A university is a large organization, and all the studies focus on the learning process of the teaching staff. It is quite understandable that the teaching staff is in a continuous learning process. This happens at both the individual and the team

level. A teacher must be up to date with the latest discoveries in his field, the latest technologies, must study permanently to publish articles, must attend conferences. A teacher can be part of several teams inside the university, from outside the university or even teams formed internationally.

On the other hand, a large number of employees in a university are non-teaching staff, employees who are part of the university but many of them do not identify themselves with it. I have not found any studies that involve this type of employees. A study of the kind would be necessary, at least in Romanian universities where the number of non-teaching staff is equal or even exceeds the number of the teaching staff.

It seems that few universities are learning organizations, and some of them do not take into account the new trends of globalization, the increasing costs for a quality education, technological change, distance education and more. The lack of flexibility and small adaptability will make many of them disappear (Friedman, Weiser Friedman, & Pollack, 2003).

In Romania, higher education is carried out in state or private universities, authorized to operate temporarily or accredited. There are currently 92 higher education institutions in Romania, of which:

- 46 civil state higher education institutions
- 7 state higher education institutions with military profile
- 5 private higher education institutions authorized to operate temporarily
- 34 private higher education institutions that are accredited

(Ministerul Educatiei, 2023)

The number of universities has decreased by ten in the last year.

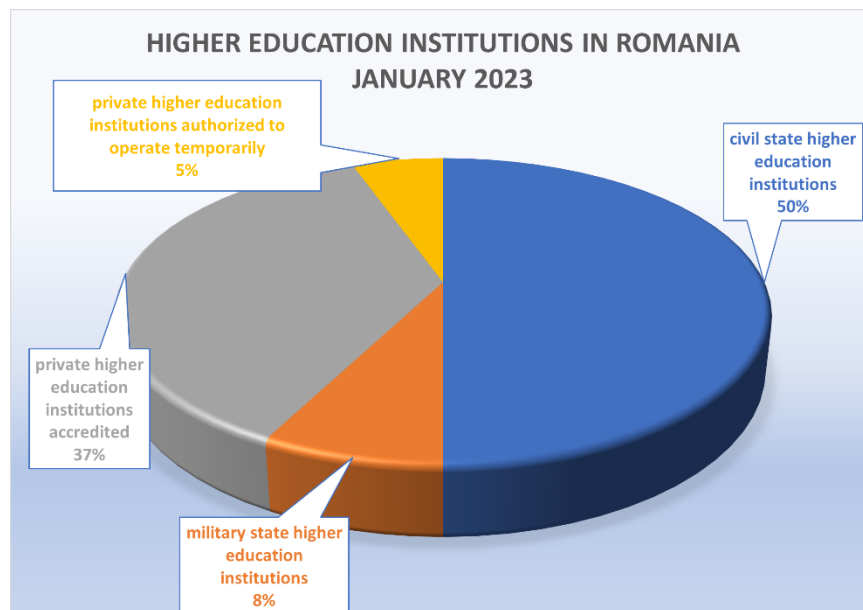


Figure 1. Higher education institutions in Romania in January 2023

5 CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of an organization is different according to its type. As a ground rule, the purpose of a private company is to generate profit, a school's can be to increase the number of students, a non-profit's organization can be to support disadvantaged groups or to promote social causes.

The goal for an institution of higher education can be a high degree of promotion on exams and, above all, the high possibility of graduates to find a job after graduation, the element that best measures the efficiency and usefulness of a university.

In the article "Is it yours a learning organization?" (Garvin, Edmonson, & Gino, 2008) published in 2008, the authors believe that all organizations should be learning organizations because employees need to be "skilled in creating, acquiring and transferring knowledge".

These employees make a difference and the organizations they work in can adapt to the changes more frequently and thus benefit from a competitive advantage in their field. An adult

who is a lifelong learner in a learning organization may be the key to success in today's economy. Because universities are not profit-generating, it may seem like a contradiction, but it is imperative that universities are also learning organizations.

An employee who is part of a learning organization must learn as an individual and as a team member. Learning within a team forces its members to learn faster. (Bui & Yehuda, 2013)

For an employee who is part of a learning organization the fact that he is encouraged to be proactive, to get involved, to ask questions and to seek answers, it can increase his creative capacity and encourage him to overcome his limits. The fact that he is not afraid that he will be held accountable for mistake, and that the mistakes (which are not encouraged) are discussed and analyzed and solutions are sought without acting against the person, all these aspects can encourage an employee to grow and develop both personally and as a member of the team to which he belongs.

Having a common purpose and vision, an employee who is part of a learning organization

satisfies his need for belonging, has closer relationships with the team members with whom he works with, increases the productivity of his work without necessarily making an additional effort (Fillion, Koffi, & Booto Ekionea, 2015).

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Bui, H., & Yehuda, B. (2013). Universities as learning organizations: internationalization and innovation. In *Handbook of Research on the Learning Organization* (pp. 227-244). Edward Elgar Publishing.
- Edmondson, A., Garvin, D., & Gino, F. (2008). <http://los.hbs.edu/>. Retrieved 10 22, 2022, from https://hbs.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_b7rYZGRxuMEyHRz?Q_JFE=qdg
- Fillion, G., Koffi, V., & Booto Ekionea, J.-P. (2015). Peter Senge's learning organization: a critical view and the addition of some new concepts to actualize theory and practice . *Journal of Organizational Culture, Communications and Conflict*, 19(3), 18.
- Friedman, H. H., Weiser Friedman, L., & Pollack, S. (2003). Transforming the University into a Learning Organization. *Decision Sciences Institute Conference*. Washington, D.C.
- Garvin, D., Edmonson, A., & Gino, F. (2008). Is yours a learning organization? *Harvard business review*, 86, 109.
- Ministerul Educatiei. (2023, Ianuarie 29). Retrieved from edu.ro/: <https://www.edu.ro/>
- Örtenblad, A. (2020). 30th anniversary of Senge's The Fifth Discipline. *The Learning Organization*, 27(1), 1-5.
- Senge, P. (1990). *The Fifth Discipline, The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization*. New York: Doubleday.