

DEFINING AND MEASURING THE HIGH PERFORMANCE ORGANIZATION

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INTRODUCTION

Since the publication of the seminal work 'In Search of Excellence' (Peters and Waterman, 1982) organizations have been interested in becoming a high performance organization (HPO). This interest became even fiercer after the phenomenal success of the books 'Built to Last' (Collins and Porras, 1994) and 'Good to Great' (Collins, 2001), the increasing globalization and accompanying intense competition, and the economic recessions (caused by the IT bubble bursting at the beginning of this century, and the financial scandals at the end of the first decade of the 21st century). Managers were looking for techniques to strengthen their organization in a way that it could not only cope with these developments and threats, but could also quickly take advantage of opportunities and thus grow and thrive. The academic and especially the practitioner fields reacted on this 'thirst for high performance knowledge' with a plethora of books and articles on the topic of HPOs. These publications each came with their own description of an HPO, such as an HPO: achieves growth rates that are higher than those of the peer group over a prolonged period of time (Collins and Porras, 1997; Wiersma, 2001; Barchiesi and La Bella, 2014; Barnett, 2014); shows the ability to react and adapt to changes quickly (Quinn et al., 2000; Weick and Sutcliffe, 2001); shows a long-term orientation (Miller and Breton-Miller, 2005; Light, 2005); has integrated management processes (i.e. strategy, structure, processes and people are aligned throughout the organization) (Kirkman et al., 1999; O'Reilly and Pfeffer, 2000); and has great working conditions and development opportunities for the workforce (Kling, 1995; Lawler et al., 1998; Underwood, 2004). As researchers approach the topic of HPO from different backgrounds and angles and with different goals, it comes as no surprise that there is no univocal definition of the HPO. However, if such a definition is not available then the construct of the HPO cannot be operationalized in measures with which an organization can be properly measured and subsequently transformed into an HPO. This is unfortunate because HPOs in today's fierce competitive world are considered to be 'guiding lights' as they are the example of how to manage and operate an organization in such a way that it creates the most added value for their stakeholders. It is also unfortunate because the lack of definition and proper measurement means that organizations can be 'mislead' in their efforts to become HPO by following ideas, so-called best practices and advices which turn out to be ineffective and sometimes even damaging. This is illustrated by the fact that we have seen organizations that, although they were designated to be HPOs in the well-known books 'In Search of Excellence' (Peters and Waterman, 1982) and 'Good to Great' (Collins, 2001), fail in the mid ort even short term: many of these organizations ran into serious economic trouble shortly after publication of the books they were profiled in and some did not even survive (Kirkby, 2005). Subsequently, researchers have shown that the criteria the authors of these books used to define and measure the HPO and on the basis of which they designated organizations to be high performing were not adequate and accurate (Niendorf and Beck, 2008; Resnick and Smunt, 2008; Raynor et al., 2009). Therefore, in this article – based on a review of the HPO literature - we attempt to answer the following research question: *How can an HPO be defined and measured?* We do not focus on the high performance individual or high performance team, our scope is strictly the organization. With the answer on our research question we aim to fill the current gap in the definition and measurement literature on HPOs and thus hope to move the research into HPOs forward.

The remainder of this article is structured as follows. In the next section we describe our research approach, i.e. the literature review, and the results of this review. We then synthesize our findings into a proposal how to define and measure an HPO. The article ends with a conclusion, limitations of the research and future research opportunities.

RESEARCH APPROACH AND RESULTS

We started the research with an extensive literature search. The criteria for including studies in our literature review were: (1) The study was aimed specifically at identifying characteristics of a HPO, i.e. applied a holistic view on the organization, its performance and its causes; (2) The study consisted of either a survey with a sufficient large number of respondents so that its results could be assumed to be (fairly) generic, or of in-depth case studies of several companies so the results were at least valid for more than one organization. The study preferably contained more than one industry in more than one country because multiple industries, sectors and countries provide a broader base of knowledge; (3) The study employed triangulation by using more than one research

method (f.i. a questionnaire and interviews); and (4) The written documentation contained an account and justification of the research method, research approach and selection of the research population, a clear analysis, and clear retraceable conclusions and results. This way the quality of the research method could be assessed. For the literature search, the Business Source premier, Emerald and Science Direct databases were reviewed, and Google was also used to look for relevant sources. In addition, books were reviewed, most of these from the business and management fields. As search words we used: the accountable organization, the adaptive enterprise, the agile corporation, the flexible organization, the high performance organization, HPO, the high performance work organization, the high-performance work system, the high reliability organization, the intelligent enterprise, the real-time enterprise, the resilient organization, the responsive organization, the robust organization, and the sustainable organization. Based on the four search criteria, the literature search yielded 487 studies over the period 1966 - 2014 which satisfied the criteria completely or partly. For the purpose of answering our research question we limited ourselves to the studies that satisfied all four criteria, which were 42 studies.

These 42 studies were summarized by the author and two additional persons, so in total three researchers. This summary contained, where available, a definition of a high performance organization, the ways to measure high organizational performance, the results an HPO achieves, and the characteristics which make up an HPO. No further evaluation of the content quality of the studies themselves was undertaken because we conducted a descriptive review, not a systematic review. For the purpose of the research described in this paper we focus on the definition and measurements, which are given in Appendix 1.

ANALYSIS

From the literature review it is notable that in 33,3 percent of the studies the high performance organization is not defined at all, which might be seen as an indication of the difficulty to describe this construct (and at the same time the urgent need to define it). In the majority of the studies which do define HPO the construct is defined in terms of a comparison to competitors in the peer group (26,2 percent) which makes sense as a comparison has to take place otherwise how can we be sure that we are dealing with *high* performance (Collins, Kaynak & Hartley, Keller & Price, McFarland, McKiernan & Purg, Navarro, Samson & Challis, Simon, Underwood, Van den Berg & De Vries, Van der Zwan). From the remaining definitions 21,5 percent are drafted in terms of what an HPO does not so much what it is (Crutchfield et al., Foster & Kaplan, Gupta, Kling, Lawler et al., Light, Miller & Le Breton-Miller, O'Regan & Ghobadian, Wiersma). This basically renders these definitions useless as the sources of high performance are not the same as the nature of high performance (Sigalas and Pekka Economou, 2013). In 9,5 percent of definitions a time indication is given or implied in the definition, i.e. that high performance is about long-term sustainability (Collins & Hansen, Collins & Porras, Mason & Brown, Park et al.). Finally, 9,5 percent of definitions can be seen as basically meaningless as the authors define an HPO in terms of their own model (Hope & Fraser, Jennings, Joyce et al., Rosen et al.). Thus, it seems to make sense to make the general definition of an HPO relative to its competitors and long-term of nature: *A High Performance Organization is an organization that achieves results that are better than those of its peer group over a long period of time.*

Appendix 1 shows that in the examined studies, competitive advantage is mainly measured with a three measurements: management/business practices and strategies applied by the organization (in 60,0 percent of the studies), financial indicators (46,7 percent) and non-financial indicators (31,1 percent). In 15,6 percent of the studies the HPO was measured by a plethora of measures, such as life-cycle data, national culture indicators, competing values framework, priorities & organizational values & principles, decisions rules applied and leadership factors. It is no wonder than that the sources from which the data for the measurements is derived are mainly the opinion of respondents (from surveys and/or interviews; 66,7 percent of the studies), information from company reports (31,1 percent) and (financial) databases (24,4 percent). In several studies alternative sources were used, such as expert opinion (8,9 percent), case study observations (8,9 percent) and others (literature review, financial indexes, 4,4 percent). Thus it seems that the main way to measure whether an organization is an HPO is by evaluating the management and business practices it applies, which is measured by a survey and/or interviews inquiring into the perception of respondents (often managers) of the effectiveness of their organizational practices and their organizational performance compared to those applied by the competition (Roberts and Dowling, 2002). This approach makes sense as the purest method of measuring high performance - comparing the performance of the organization on a limited set of selected practices against the performance of all the most important competitors on the same practices (Chandler and Hanks, 1993) - is often not feasible: information on the organizational practices of competitors might not be available in the public domain; competitors can describe their practices in a different way; the organization and its competitors might not be comparable; organizations might not want to disclose their practices; and in a large scale study it takes too much time and effort to collect all the required information (Dess and Robinson, 1984; Mansour et al., 2014). In addition, many studies have shown that the

subjective measure of respondents' perception of organizational practices and their resulting performance is a good proxy of real organizational performance as these studies found strong correlations between perceptual and objective performance data, i.e. the perception of respondents on how well their firm performed (measured in a subjective and relative way) was consistent with how the firm actually performed (Dess and Robinson, 1984; Geringer and Hebert, 1991; Bommer et al., 1995; Delaney and Huselid, 1996; Glaister and Buckley, 1998; Dawes, 1999; Deshpandé et al., 2004; Heap and Bolton, 2004; Murphy and Callaway, 2004; Wall et al., 2004; Jing and Avery, 2008; Vij and Bedi, 2016). This makes it possible for researchers to use subjective performance measures when access to objective performance data is restricted or collection of the information is just not feasible. An added advantage of this is, as Newbert (2008) remarked, that any a priori assumptions on the part of the researcher regarding what ought to constitute an HPO in a specific context can be avoided by asking respondents to answer the question: "How did your organization perform compared to its competitors over the past five years: better, the same, or worse?"

CONCLUSION, LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

In this paper we looked for an answer on the research question: *How can an HPO be defined and measured?* By looking at the literature on high performance organizations concept closely related to that of 'high performance', we were able to obtain a list of definitions and measurements for an HPO. The common denominator in these definitions and measurements turned out to be respondents given their opinion on the performance of their organizational practices and organizational performance vis-à-vis that of competitors. We concluded therefore that an HPO should be defined and measured relative to competitors and should be based on the perception of managers and employees of the organization. This is well possible because there is a strong correlation between the perception of people on performance and actual performance compared to competitors. To make the perception measurement of the HPO context independent, we proposed to ask the perception question in general terms and not ask for specific indicators. This way respondents will for themselves evaluate the performance of their organization against competitors on the various aspects and indicators important in their industry, and reach a verdict on the overall performance level of their organization against that of competitors.

There are several limitations to our research. Despite an extensive literature search it is possible that we have missed important and relevant literature sources which should have been included in the Appendix. Future research could cast its net even wider during a literature search to prevent omissions. Another limitation is that we have not checked our definition and proposed perceptual measurement with experts. Future research could do this, for instance through a Delphi approach. Future research should also check in practice whether our proposed definition and the measurement 'fit' actual HPOs.

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APPENDIX 1 – OVERVIEW RESULTS LITERATURE REVIEW

Author	Title	Year	High performance organization Definition / description	Measured by	Source of data
Accenture	When good management shows	2002	Not given.	(a) Return on invested capital (b) Business strategies applied	(a) Value Line and Stern Stewart databases (b) Opinions of executives
Bailom, Matzler & Tschernernjak	Enduring success	2007	Not given.	Financial indicators, market position, business strategies	(a) Company reports (b) Opinion of respondents
Bloom and Van Reenen	Measuring and explaining management practices across firms and countries	2006	Not given.	Management practices applied along three operations-focused dimensions: (1) performance monitoring, (2) target setting, and (3) incentives/people management	Opinion of respondents
Bloom, Genakos, Sadun & van Reenen	Management practices across firms and countries	2012	Not given.	Management practices along three operations-focused dimensions: (1) performance monitoring, (2) target setting, and (3) incentives/people management	Opinion of respondents
Collins	Good to great	2001	A high performance organization is an organization that has at least a three times bigger cumulative stock return than the general market.	(a) Financial and operational indicators (b) Business practices applied	(a) Company reports (b) Opinion of respondents
Collins & Hansen	Great by choice	2011	Companies that thrive in uncertainty and chaos.	(a) Stock returns (b) Life-cycle data (c) Business practices applied	Historical company chronologies
Collins & Porras	Built to last	1994	An organization that has survived through the years, that has been resilient in bad times.	Business practices applied	(a) Expert/ & respondents opinions (b) Company reports (c) Fin. databases
Crutchfield & McLeod Grant	Forces for good	2008	Organizations that have a high and sustained social impact by influencing and transforming others in order to do more with less.	(a) Sales growth (b) Business practices applied	(a) Opinion of respondents (b) Case study observations
Deshpandé, Farley & Webster	Triad lessons	2000	Not given.	Marketing and organizational culture indicators	Opinions of respondents
Deshpandé, Farley & Bowman	Tigers, dragons and others	2004	Not given.	Marketing, innovativeness and national culture related indicators	Opinions of respondents
Foster & Kaplan	Creative destruction	2001	A high performing organization is a company that has found the balance between creation and destruction, that matches its speed of change to the change level of the market it operates in, who involves employees and partners in the decision making processes, and lets go of conventional ideas about tight control without letting management slip.	Financial and other organizational data (no specification given)	McKinsey Corporate Performance Database

Gupta	Cultural basis of high performance organizations	2011	In a high performance work organization the basic premise is to create an internal environment that supports customer needs and expectations.	Organizational and societal practices and values	Opinion of respondents (from the GLOBE database)
Hope & Fraser	Beyond budgeting	2003	It is an organization that implements the 12 beyond budgeting principles.	Management processes	Opinion of respondents
Jennings	Less is more	2002	An organization that uses the 'Less is More' framework.	Productivity factors	Company information
Joyce, Nohria & Roberson	What really works	2003	A Winner is a company that follows the 4+2 practices-formula.	Total return to shareholders	Data on companies and management practices, from the Evergreen Project
Kanter	Evolve!	2001	Not given.	E-culture practices applied	(a) Opinions of respondents (b) Case study observations
Kaynak & Hartley	Exploring quality management practices and high tech firm performance	2005	High performing high tech firms have implemented quality management more extensively in an integrated way than low performing high tech firms.	(a) Total inventory turnover, product quality, and sales growth (b) Quality management practices applied	(a) Company information (b) Opinion of respondents
Keller & Price	Beyond performance	2011	HPOs actively manage both their performance and their health (e.g. ability to align, execute and renew itself faster than the competition).	(a) Financial and operational indicators (b) Practices underpinning organizational health (such as direction, culture, climate)	(a) Annual reports (b) Opinion of respondents
Kling	High performance work systems and firm performance	1995	A high performance work organization is an organization that chooses to rely upon the creativity, ingenuity and problem-solving abilities of their workers. To do so, they provide workers with the information, skills, incentives and responsibilities to make decisions essential for innovation, quality improvement and rapid response to change.	Specific work practices and productivity	Literature review
Lawler, Mohrman & Ledford	Strategies for high performance organizations	1998	A company which has an effective, integrated set of management practices that support its business strategy and the core competencies and organizational capabilities needed for this.	Management practices applied	Opinion of respondents
Light	The four pillars of high performance	2005	A 'robust organization' selects the best plan for a range of possibilities in order to be hedged against vulnerabilities and surprises and then adapts itself to changing circumstances by shaping the future to its liking. It assumes that surprises and downturns are inevitable, watches for signals that a given future is coming true, and takes action to hedge against threats and vulnerabilities, while shaping the future to its advantage.	Business practices applied	(a) RAND database containing reports on many different organizational facets (b) Opinion of respondents
Mannion, Davies & Marshall	Cultures for performance in healthcare	2005	Not given.	(a) Variables from the competing values framework (b) internal processes and mechanisms	(a) Opinions of respondents (b) Case study observations

Mason & Brown	High growth firms in Scotland	2010	Enterprises with average annualized growth in employees or turnover greater than 20 percent per annum, over a 3 year period, with more than 10 employees at the beginning of the observation.	(a) Financial indicators (b) The activities, competences and history of the organization	(a) Commercial business database FAME (Financial Analysis Made Easy) (b) Opinion of respondents
McFarland	The breakthrough company	2008	A high performance organization is an organization that has at least a three times bigger cumulative stock return than the general market.	(a) Financial and operational indicators (b) Business practices applied	(a) Business reports (b) Opinion of respondents
McKiernan & Purg	Hidden champions in CEE and Turkey	2013	A 'hidden champion' is number 1, 2 or 3 in the global market, or number 1 on its continent, in terms of market share; has revenue below \$4 billion; and has a low level of public awareness.	(a) Financial indicators (b) Competitive practices of the organization	(a) Financial reports (b) Opinion of respondents
Miller & Le Breton-Miller	Managing for the long run	2005	A high performing family controlled business is managing not for the short-term profits but for the very long-term market success and for the benefit of all organizational stakeholders.	Priorities and philosophies applied in the organization	(a) Public information and company information (b) Opinion of respondents
Navarro	Always a winner	2009	An 'Always a winner' organization is an organization that performs better than competitors in all phases of the economic cycle.	Stock price performance	Data from the S&P 500 index
O'Regan & Ghobadian	Drivers of performance in small- and medium-sized firms, an empirical study	2004	High performing firms are firms that give a greater degree of emphasis to the attributes of culture, leadership and strategic planning associated with the performance criteria, compared with low performance firms.	Strategic planning, strategic leadership and organizational culture variables	Opinion of respondents
Park, Zhou & Ungson	Rough diamonds	2013	'Rough diamonds' are exemplary breakout firms that are capitalizing on the developing nature of their home countries in Brazil, Russia, India and China. They typically don't have the advantage of established environments but do find themselves pitted against large, established competitors.	(a) Financial and operational indicators (b) Business practices employed	(a) Business reports (b) Opinion of respondents
Raynor & Ahmed	The three rules	2013	Not given.	Decision rules applied by organizations (i.e. how these companies think)	Compustat data with 'company observations'
Rosen, Digh, Singer & Phillips	Global literacies	2000	An organization that has a leader that understands the four global literacies and uses these to the advantage of the company.	Characteristics most common to successful global leaders, and leadership factors	Opinion of respondents
Samson & Challis	Patterns of excellence	1999	An organization that has achieved a powerful link-up between four critical factors: strategy, actions, consequences and rewards. It is an organization that outperforms an 'ordinary' organization on the 70-point principle scale.	Management principles applied	Opinion of respondents
Simon	Hidden champions	1996	A 'hidden champion' is number 1 or 2 in the global market, or number 1 in Europe, in terms of market share; is small/medium sized with a revenue below \$1 billion; and has a low level of public awareness.	(a) Financial indicators (b) Competitive practices of the organization	(a) Financial reports (b) Opinion of respondents

Stadler	The 4 principles of enduring success	2007	Not given.	(a) Total shareholder return (b) business strategies	(a) Financial databases (b) Company reports (c) Opinion of respondents
Sull & Escobari	Success against the odds	2005	Not given.	Operating and financial variables	(a) Financial databases (b) Expert opinion (c) Opinion of respondents
Sull & Wang	Made in China	2005	Not given.	(a) Financial data (b) Expert opinion	(a) Company information (b) Opinion of experts
Underwood	What's your corporate IQ?	2004	'Smart companies' are different from their counterparts because they manage with the future in mind. They do not mind taking a quarterly hit to their financial performance if it helps long-term success of the firm. They also value their people in everything they do.	17 variables that measure organizational behavior (in the areas of strategy, organization and character)	Opinions of respondents
Van den Berg & De Vries	High performing organizations	2004	It is an organization that outperforms its competitors, because it has established a superior organizational climate. It is an organization that produces fast and durable results, without making concessions to quality and trustworthiness.	42 items which have to do with purposeful decision-making and handling of an organization	(a) Data from the Hay Group and the Corporate Research Foundation (b) Opinion of respondents
van der Zwan	Koplopers en achterblijvers in de bedrijvenwereld	1987	Organizations that have better investment policies than other organizations in their industry.	Cash flow generation	(a) Financial reports (b) Opinion of experts (Delphi method)
Varadarajan & Ramanujam	The corporate performance conundrum	1990	Not given.	Key strategic and organizational factors	Articles on the companies
Wiersma	The new market leaders	2001	It is a company that tries to serve all customers in the market and does not hold back on any methods.	(a) Financial and market indicators (b) business practices	Sales-Growth Index and Market-Value Index
Wolf	Transcending paradox	2009	Not given.	(a) Employee engagement, patient satisfaction, employee turnover, internal productivity measures, and superior performance in both financial and quality outcomes (b) Business practices applied	Case study observations