

# The high performance organization: proposed definition and measurement of its performance

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – *The purpose of this paper is to arrive at a general definition of an HPO and a (practical) way to measure an HPO. Managers are looking for techniques to strengthen their organizations in a way that they cannot only cope with 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 high performance organizations (HPOs). These publications each came with their own description and measurement of HPOs, which created a lot of confusion among practitioners.*

**Design/methodology/approach** – *In this study the following research question is answered: how can an HPO be defined and its performance measured? So that with the answer, this paper can take away the aforementioned confusion. This paper does this by conducting an extensive systematic review of the literature on HPO, after which this paper synthesizes the findings into a proposal on how to define and measure the HPO.*

**Findings** – *This paper was able to obtain from the literature 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 effects of the organizational practices they apply on organizational performance vis-à-vis that of competitors. This paper 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: An HPO is an organization that achieves results that are better than those of its peer group over a longer period of time.*

**Research limitations/implications** – *With the answer on the research question, this paper fills the current gap in the definition and measurement literature on HPOs, and thus, has moved the research into HPOs forward, as researchers can use these research results in their future studies on high performance and HPOs.*

**Originality/value** – *Although there is a plethora of literature on high performance and HPOs no univocal definition and measurement of the HPO can be found. This study provides for the first time an academically well-founded definition and measurement method.*

**Keywords** HPO, Measurement, High performance organization, Definition

**Paper type** Research paper

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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 information technology (IT) bubble bursting at the beginning of this century, the financial scandals at the end of the first decade of the 21st century, and the Corona epidemic at the beginning of the second decade of this century). Managers were looking for techniques

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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 description, let alone definition, of the HPO (Do and Mai, 2020).

What is noticeable is that many descriptions do not constitute a definition *per se* but rather a listing of attributes or dimensions, of an HPO. There is a difference between the two as, according to the Cambridge Dictionary, an attribute is a quality or characteristic that someone or something has, while a definition is a statement that explains the meaning of a word or phrase. In our research, we were explicitly looking for a statement that explains the HPO in a concise manner, i.e. describes what an HPO is; not for a list of characteristics, i.e. what an HPO consists of. The reason for our research focus is that in the literature a multitude of attributes can be found, which would mean that the definition of an HPO would differ every time different attributes are incorporated, causing the idea of achieving a uniform definition of the HPO to be an utopian idea. Do and Mai (2020, p. 304) concluded, based on a literature review of HPO studies, that:

[...] the lack of a clear and univocal definition has resulted in a constant search for HPO theories and conceptualization for many years, marked by a plethora of books and publications on this topic. And that it can be argued that most definitions and approaches were stretched to fit the argument and interpretations of each scholar, causing poor conceptualization and incomplete understanding of HPO.

In addition, if a clear definition is not available then the construct of the HPO cannot be operationalized in such a way that an organization can measure its “level of HPO-ness” (i.e. how do we know that the organization is outperforming its competitors or peer group) (McKinley, 2010; Williams *et al.*, 2020). 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 of its performance means that organizations can be “misled” in their efforts to become HPO by following up on ideas, so-called best practices and advises, which turn out to be ineffective and sometimes even damaging to the organization. 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 or even short term. Many of these organizations ran into serious economic trouble shortly after the 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 the HPO and measure its performance 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). Thus, there is a clear need to address this gap in the current HPO literature and we are going to attempt this by answering the following research question:

*RQ.* How can an HPO be defined and its performance measured?

To be clear, we do not focus on the high performance individual or high performance team, our scope is strictly the entity “organization.” As mentioned before, we are not looking at the attributes or dimensions, which make up an HPO, we only look at how the HPO can be most accurately defined and its performance best measured. 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. This study will also have practical implications because with a better definition, better way to measure the performance of an HPO and more research into HPOs, practitioners will in the future be provided with better tools and techniques to help them transform their organizations into HPOs. 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.

### The systematic literature review

Our search for a definition and measurements for the HPO was part of a larger study we undertook into the characteristics of an HPO, the results of which have been documented in multiple publications ([de Waal, 2006](#); [de Waal, 2012](#)). This study applied a systematic literature review (SLR), which is described by [Briner and Denyer \(2012, p. 112\)](#) as follows:

[...] a systematic review addresses a specific question, utilizes explicit and transparent methods to perform a thorough literature search and critical appraisal of individual studies, and draws conclusions about what we currently know and do not know about a given question or topic.

An SLR aims to identify, critically evaluate and integrate data from all relevant publications in a detailed and planned process to address a specifically stated research question, by explicitly and transparently describing the search process and criteria applied for the literature included in the review ([Bachkirova et al., 2020](#); [Williams et al., 2020](#)). The advantages of using an SLR over traditional types of literature reviews are, according to [Williams et al. \(2020\)](#), that an SLR provides a transparent, objective and holistic overview of existing knowledge related to a research question; presents a broad, comprehensive representation of relevant knowledge; discerns whether previous findings are consistent and generalizable, allows the absorption of a growing amount of available research; and synthesizes prior research in a complete and transparent manner. Finally, even if constructs are defined and measured differently in previous studies, as is the case with the HPO construct, the SLR gives the means to synthesize these different outcomes ([Durach et al., 2017](#); [Siddaway et al., 2019](#)), thus leading to better definitions created from the original literature sources, more robust construct conceptualizations and better measurement instruments ([Williams et al., 2020](#)). Specific reasons for not using a traditional review, also referred to as a narrative review, was that we were not aiming at constructing a foundation of hypotheses ([Brereton et al., 2007](#)); and that we wanted to “cast our search net as wide as possible” not cherry-picking literature potentially supporting these hypotheses ([Briner and Denyer, 2012](#)) but instead using a holistic approach ([Paul and Criado, 2020](#); [Siddaway et al., 2019](#)) to construct a comprehensive view of the knowledge formed in previous studies ([Pati and Lorusso, 2018](#)).

Specifically, we applied a “knowledge-building and theory-generating qualitative systematic review” ([Finfgeld-Connett and Johnson, 2013](#)), using the guidelines as provided by [Williams et al. \(2020\)](#): planning the systematic review by drafting a protocol, which contained clear research questions, a search strategy and criteria for deciding if articles found in the search of the literature warranted inclusion in the review; identifying all potentially relevant studies (not just the easily accessible articles); conducting the review

itself to gather the knowledge from the studies; analyzing and synthesizing the knowledge; and reporting the process, findings and knowledge discerned. The criteria for including studies in our SLR were (as described in [de Waal, 2006](#)):

- The study was aimed specifically at identifying characteristics of an HPO.
- 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 used triangulation by using more than one research method (i.e. a questionnaire and interviews).
- 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.

In this way, we would wind up with studies that would satisfy the call of [Richard \*et al.\* \(2009\)](#) to study the topic of performance from multiple angles. 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 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 [1]. 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 the research question postulated in this article we limited ourselves to the studies that satisfied all four criteria, which were 42 in total. These 42 studies were summarized. Each summary contained in principle a definition of the HPO and the way to measure the performance of the HPO, these are given in the [Appendix](#). This [Appendix](#) forms the basis for our analysis, as described in the next section.

## Analysis

### *Defining the high performance organization*

From the SLR, it is notable that in 33.3% of the studies the HPO 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%), which makes sense as a comparison has to take place otherwise how can we be sure that we are dealing with *high* performance ([Collins, 2001](#); [Kaynak and Hartley, 2005](#); [Keller and Price, 2011](#); [McFarland, 2008](#); [McKiernan and Purg, 2013](#); [Navarro, 2009](#); [Samson and Challis, 1999](#); [Simon, 1996](#); [Underwood, 2004](#); [Berg and De Vries, 2004](#); [Van der Zwan, 1987](#)). From the remaining definitions, 21,5% are drafted in terms of what an HPO does (i.e. attributes), not so much what it is ([Crutchfield \*et al.\*, 2008](#); [Foster and Kaplan, 2001](#); [Gupta, 2011](#); [Kling, 1995](#); [Lawler \*et al.\*, 1998](#); [Light, 2005](#); [Miller and Le Breton-Miller, 2005](#); [O'Regan and Ghobadian, 2004](#); [Wiersma, 2004](#)). 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% of definitions, a time indication is given or implied in the definition, i.e. that high performance is about *long-term sustainability* ([Collins and Hansen, 2011](#); [Collins and Porras, 1994](#); [Mason and Brown, 2010](#); [Park \*et al.\*, 2013](#)). Finally, 9.5% of definitions can be seen as basically meaningless as the authors define an HPO in terms of their own model ([Hope and Fraser, 2003](#); [Jennings, 2002](#);

Joyce *et al.*, 2003; Rosen *et al.*, 2000), which makes for a circular line of reasoning. Thus, it seems to make sense to:

- Make the general definition of an HPO relative to its competitors.
- Long-term of nature: *A HPO is an organization that achieves results that are better than those of its peer group over a longer period of time.*

The advantage of adding the “longer period of time” part is that this takes into account that the organization also has to perform better than its competitors/peer group during times of disruption such as economic crises, thus bringing the element of performance sustainability in the HPO definition. A suggestion for an actual number of years for the “longer period of time” is five, as recent research into the longevity of outperformance showed that real top performers maintain their performance advantage for at least five years (Reeves *et al.*, 2020).

### *Measuring the high performance organization*

The [Appendix](#) shows that in the examined studies the performance of an HPO is mainly measured by one of four options:

1. The performance effects of the management/business practices and strategies applied by the organization (in 60.0% of the studies).
2. Financial indicators (in 46.7% of the studies).
3. Non-financial indicators (in 31.1% of the studies).
4. A plethora of measures (in 15.6% of the studies) such as life-cycle data, national culture indicators, competing values framework, priorities and organizational values and principles, decisions rules applied and leadership factors.

It is no wonder 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% of the studies), information from company reports (31.1%) and (financial) databases (24.4%). In several studies, alternate sources were used, such as expert opinion (8.9%), case study observations (8.9%) and others (literature review, financial indexes; 4.4%).

Thus, it seems that the main way to measure the performance of an HPO is by evaluating the performance effects of the management and business practices it applies, which is evaluated by a survey and/or interviews inquiring into the perception of respondents (often managers) of these effects compared to the effects of the management and business practices applied by the competitors or peer group (Roberts and Dowling, 2002). This approach makes sense as the best and purest method of measuring high performance – which is comparing the performance of the organization on a limited set of selected practices or indicators against the performance of the most important competitors on the same practices or indicators (Chandler and Hanks, 1993) – is often not feasible. Information on the organizational practices or indicator scores 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 really comparable; organizations might not want to disclose their practices or scores on indicators; and in a large scale study, it takes too much time and effort to collect all the required information (Camps and Luna-Arocas, 2012; Dess and Robinson, 1984; Hult *et al.*, 2008; Mansour *et al.*, 2014; Sing *et al.*, 2016).

Using this approach of measuring the HPO makes sense as HPO researchers have found quite an overlap in the management and business practices in use in organizations (Do and Mai, 2020; Kirby, 2005; Kirkman, 1999). This makes it possible for managers to assume that the management and business practices applied in their organization will most probably also be used in the organizations they are comparing themselves with. Therefore, there is

no need to specifically name and quantify the management and business practices that are compared. Also, asking well-informed respondents about organizational performance allows the subjective measurements (i.e. perceptions) to be strongly tailored to “the dimensionality of the context of interest” (Richard *et al.*, 2009, p. 734). In addition, many studies have shown that the subjective measure of respondents’ perception of organizational practices and their resulting performance (i.e. basically a self-assessment of the respondents on their organization) is a good proxy of real organizational performance. 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; Sing *et al.*, 2016; Vij and Bedi, 2016). The explanation for this is given by Sing *et al.* (2016, p. 214):

Considering that an inflated operational performance (OP) measure can be cross-checked with the use of secondary data, managers have little incentive to report such figures. As a result, when quizzed over the stand-alone performance measures of their organizations or vis-à-vis their rivals, managers accurately assess and respond to questions on the performance of their organizations.

In addition, Sing *et al.* (2016) concluded that the fear that subjective measurements are less appropriate for assessing organizational performance compared with objective measures because respondents may tend to overestimate the performance of their own organizations thus leading to inaccurate estimations of organizational performance, or that the explanatory variables of performance are measured using the same informant, which can lead to a common method bias, can be laid to rest when the subjective measurements are carefully collected.

Thus, it is possible for researchers to use subjective performance measures when access to objective performance data is restricted or the collection of the information is just not feasible (Singh *et al.*, 2016). An added advantage 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/peer group over the past five years: better, the same or worse?” Because of this feasibility, in the literature, many research studies can be found that have used subjective measures for assessing organizational performance and its determinants (Sing *et al.*, 2016).

## Conclusion, limitations and future research

In this paper, we looked for an answer on the research question:

*RQ.* How can an HPO be defined and its performance measured?

By looking at the literature on HPOs and concepts 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 (Kunze *et al.*, 2013; Kyrgidou and Spyropoulou, 2013). 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.

In previous research and papers on HPO, which we have published in the past years, we have already used the HPO definition as developed and proposed in this article. Other researchers have come across our proposed HPO definition and it seems to have struck a chord with them, possibly because they were also looking for an adequate definition, as an increasing number of them are using the proposed HPO definition and measurements in their own research (Abdullah *et al.*, 2018; Do and Mai, 2020; Geleta, 2019; Hijal-Moghrabi *et al.*, 2017; Honyenuga and Tuninga, 2013; Honyenuga *et al.*, 2019; Kalimullah *et al.*, 2019; Roijen *et al.*, 2017; Thoman and Lloyd, 2018; Zbierowski, 2020).

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 our review. Future research could cast its net even wider during a literature search to prevent omissions. Another limitation is that we have not checked our proposed definition and measurement method 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 method “fit” actual HPOs. Finally, as argued in this article, the preferred method of measuring an HPO is to basically use self-assessments by respondents from the organization. Despite ample scientific evidence that this is a feasible method, it would be (even more) accurate to compare the financial results and the HPO scores of an organization with those of its main competitors to obtain an objective picture of the performance of this organization *vis-à-vis* its competitors. This way of measuring the performance of an HPO requires further investigation.

## Note

1. We did not apply Boolean operators as we did not use combinations of search terms.

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**Table A1** Overview results literature review

<i>Author (year)</i>	<i>Title</i>	<i>High performance organization Definition/description</i>	<i>HPO performance measured by</i>	<i>Source of data</i>
Linder and McCarthy (2002)	When good management shows	Not given	(a) Return on invested capital (b) business strategies applied	(a) Value Line and Stern Stewart databases (b) opinions of executives
Bailom et al. (2007)	Enduring success	Not given	Financial indicators, market position, business strategies	(a) Company reports (b) Opinion of respondents
Bloom and Van Reenen (2006)	Measuring and explaining management practices across firms and countries	Not given	Management practices applied along three operations-focused dimensions, namely, performance monitoring, target setting and incentives/people management	Opinion of respondents
Bloom et al. (2012)	Management practices across firms and countries	Not given	Management practices along three operations-focused dimensions, namely, performance monitoring, target setting and incentives/people management	Opinion of respondents
Collins (2001)	Good to great	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 and Hansen (2011)	Great by choice	Companies that thrive in uncertainty and chaos	(a) Stock returns (b) life-cycle data (c) business practices applied	Historical company chronologies
Collins and Porras (1994)	Built to last	An organization that has survived through the years, that has been resilient in bad times	Business practices applied	(a) Expert/and respondents opinions (b) company reports (c) fin. databases
Crutchfield and McLeod Grant (2008)	Forces for good	Organizations that have a high and sustained social impact by influencing and transforming others to do more with less	(a) Sales growth (b) business practices applied	(a) Opinion of respondents (b) case study observations
Deshpandé, Farley and Webster (2000)	Triad lessons	Not given	Marketing and organizational culture indicators	Opinions of respondents
Deshpandé, Farley and Bowman (2004)	Tigers, dragons and others	Not given	Marketing, innovativeness and national culture-related indicators	Opinions of respondents
Foster and Kaplan (2001)	Creative destruction	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

(continued)

**Table A1**

<i>Author (year)</i>	<i>Title</i>	<i>High performance organization Definition/description</i>	<i>HPO performance measured by</i>	<i>Source of data</i>
Gupta (2011)	Cultural basis of high performance organizations	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 and Fraser (2003)	Beyond budgeting	It is an organization that implements the 12 beyond budgeting principles	Management processes	Opinion of respondents
Jennings (2002)	Less is more	An organization that uses the "less is more" framework	Productivity factors	Company information
Joyce et al. (2003)	What really works	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 (2001)	Evolve!	Not given	E-culture practices applied	(a) Opinions of respondents (b) case study observations
Kaynak and Hartley (2005)	Exploring quality management practices and high tech firm performance	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 and Price (2011)	Beyond performance	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 and climate)	(a) Annual reports (b) opinion of respondents
Kling (1995)	High performance work systems and firm performance	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 et al. (1998)	Strategies for high performance organizations	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 (2005)	The four pillars of high performance	A "robust organization" selects the best plan for a range of possibilities 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

(continued)

Table A1

<i>Author (year)</i>	<i>Title</i>	<i>High performance organization Definition/description</i>	<i>HPO performance measured by</i>	<i>Source of data</i>
Mannion <i>et al.</i> (2005)	Cultures for performance in healthcare	Not given	(a) Variables from the competing values framework (b) internal processes and mechanisms	(a) Opinions of respondents (b) case study observations
Mason and Brown (2010)	High growth firms in Scotland	Enterprises with average annualized growth in employees or turnover greater than 20% per annum, over a three 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 (2008)	The breakthrough company	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 and Purg (2013)	Hidden champions in CEE and Turkey	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 \$4bn; 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 and Breton-Miller (2005)	Managing for the long run	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 (2009)	Always a winner	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 and Ghobadian (2004)	Drivers of performance in small- and medium-sized firms, an empirical study	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 <i>et al.</i> (2013)	Rough diamonds	"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 do not have the advantage of established environments but do find themselves pitted against large, established competitors	(a) Financial and operational indicators (b) business practices used	(a) Business reports (b) opinion of respondents
Raynor and Ahmed (2013)	The three rules	Not given	Decision rules applied by organizations (i.e. how these companies think)	CompStat data with "company observations"
Rosen <i>et al.</i> (2000)	Global literacies	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 (continued)

**Table A1**

<i>Author (year)</i>	<i>Title</i>	<i>High performance organization Definition/description</i>	<i>HPO performance measured by</i>	<i>Source of data</i>
Samson and Challis (1999)	Patterns of excellence	An organization that has achieved a powerful link-up between four critical factors, namely, 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 (1996)	Hidden champions	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 \$1bn; 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 (2007)	The four principles of enduring success	Not given	(a) Total shareholder return (b) business strategies	(a) Financial databases (b) company reports (c) opinion of respondents
Sull and Escobarri (2005)	Success against the odds	Not given	Operating and financial variables	(a) Financial databases (b) expert opinion (c) opinion of respondents
Sull and Wang (2005)	Made in China	Not given	(a) Financial data (b) expert opinion	(a) Company information (b) Opinion of experts
Underwood (2004)	What is your corporate IQ?	"Smart companies" are different from their counter-parts 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 every-thing they do	17 variables that measure organizational behavior (in the areas of strategy, organization and character)	Opinions of respondents
Berg and De Vries (2004)	High performing organizations	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) opinions of respondents
Van der Zwan (1987)	Koplopers en achterblijvers in de bedrijverwereld	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 and Ramanujam (1990)	The corporate performance conundrum	Not given	Key strategic and organizational factors	Articles on the companies
Wiermsma (2001)	The new market leaders	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(2009)	Transcending paradox	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