

## **An Exploration of Organizational Learning Perceptions and Understandings in Malaysia**

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**Abstract:** This study is an exploratory study of Malaysian organization's understanding and perception of organizational learning. The study also examines organization's understanding of the concepts and terminology of Organizational Learning (OL) in comparing to the Training and Development (T&D). The common explanation of organizational learning encompasses learning as a process where knowledge is acquired and transferred to facilitate continuous change and improvement through learning. This study examines the level of understanding and perception of learning concepts across the health, academic, government and manufacturing sectors in Malaysia. The respondents were executives, human resource managers and academics. In total, there were thirty five of them gone through the in-depth interview. Data was analyzed using Nudist (v6) Software to identify patterns and trends in the responses. The results suggest that in general, practitioners and academics have a good understanding of the concept; however, implementation across the industry sectors is variable. The highest level of understanding and implementation occurred in the manufacturing sector, possibly because of the exposure to international best practice. One limitation is that this is a preliminary qualitative study encompassing only a small sample, however, strength is that the study captures a broad range of views from management practitioners and there is much that other industries can learn from the strategies and practices that are being implemented.

**Key words:** Organizational learning, training and development, definition, exploratory, Malaysia

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### **INTRODUCTION**

The fast changing environment and the globalization demand besides world's economic crisis indirectly mounted a great pressure to the developing countries like Malaysia. In addition, these issues will either directly or indirectly surely will give the same pressure to the organizations with the country. Since the 1990s, the role of learning and its impact on organizations has emerged as a significant area of study. Therefore, Calantone stressed that to remain competitive and relevant an organization should adopt incessant work-based activity in obtaining information which later became the supply of worth, vibrant market place, escalating rivalry, bigger client demand and simply imitable goods/processes. Since late 1990's, many Malaysian industries faced negative financial effects after the change in world's political and socio-economic situation. For instance, in 2001, tourism industry greatly affected due to the 9/11 tragedy in New York, the appearance of Sub-Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARs) virus in 2003, plus recently within

2014 Malaysian was shocked by two airlines incidences involving Malaysian Airlines System, one with Air Asia Airlines System besides unexpected flood tragedy that happened in few states of Malaysia plus fluctuating fuel prices will definitely lead to negative income of Malaysian tourism. In such a situation, little enhancement in customer service and contentment be able to offer industry with scratch reasonable return. However, according to the data from the Ministry of Tourism Malaysia in 2013 there are RM 65.44 billion tourist receipts generated that showed a growth of 22.55% as compared to RM 53.4 billion in 2009. It was also registered that 25,715,460 tourist arrived in 2013 that lead to an increase of 2.7% compared to 2012. This great increment of tourism was contributed by the readiness to learn and to change by the people involved with the tourism industry. The growth percentage of tourist flowing in to Malaysia in 2013 must have a strong relation to the stability of our economy as well as the political atmosphere.

Similarly, according to Yusoff (2005), Malaysian public sector has adopted the organizational learning

approach via 'Excellent Work Culture Movement' on November 27, 1989 has resulted the adoption of ICT in 1990s, remuneration systems in 2000 and competency assessments recently. As a result to the past government effort, Hussein *et al.* (2014) explained, the fortitude of today's higher education institutions greatly depends on the organizational learning capacity and the ability to accept change. As a result of the organizational learning adoption by the Malaysians higher education institutions has attracted a huge number of international students in a very short span of time.

**Literature review:** Review of the literature on organizational learning identifies that learning involves processes and strategies that allow for consistent changes and interpretation of those strategies, so the organisation can achieve its targets (Williams, 2001). A growing body of literature suggests that the capacity to discover as of and respond appropriately to the changes, understood as enhanced knowledge and spontaneous effect is the pertinent inner tactic that an organizations be able to employ to alter or acclimatize and build constant improvements which in turn positively affects performance and effectiveness (Alegre *et al.*, 2012; Granerud and Rocha, 2011; Anand *et al.*, 2009; Savolainen and Haikonen, 2007; Robinson *et al.*, 1997).

The literature of organizational learning proposed that the notion is becoming more successful after it is implanted into the culture of the specific organization. Proponents argue that organisational learning not only benefits the organization but fosters positive employee behavioral result for instance work contentment (Tortorella and Fogliatto, 2014; Jenkins *et al.*, 2003; Ozuah *et al.*, 2001), obligation (Lancaster and Strand, 2001), plus faithfulness thereby reducing resignation and malingering (Bowman and Ambrosini, 1997). Hence, organizational learning is the mechanism that can be used by the organization to keep themselves competitive and up to date (Alavi *et al.*, 2014; Granerud and Rocha, 2011; Anand *et al.*, 2009; Savolainen and Haikonen, 2007). In the past few years till up to date, the government of Malaysian shown positive shore up to progress the overall escalation as well as wealth of the country for its intention to develop into the first world nation via the execution of learning as their key and main strategy.

**Support of Malaysian government for organizational learning:** Constantly, the leaders in Malaysia place Organizational Learning (OL) as their main concern and the government as a whole strongly support the motion of organizational learning in Malaysia. For instance, Tan

Sri Abdul Halim bin Ali, the former secretary of Malaysia in his speech on October 7, 1996 clearly addressed the government initiative in promoting OL:

Organizational learning demands a shift that goes all the way down to the core of our organizations culture. Its purpose is continuous transformation and the process is through collective thinking and working together. Knowledge that we create through organizational learning allows us to reframe and re-conceptualize issues in the organization's working environment as the two factors learning and change reinforce each other... Organizational learning when successful should pave the way towards the creation of an intelligent organization. Members of the organization demonstrate their highest commitment for quality and integrity through self-directed teams. Everyone exercises their intelligence to co-create products, improve services, solve problems, enhance each other's skill and work with each other to ensure the whole system operates smoothly (1996:1-2)

In addition, Tun Dr Abdullah Haji Ahmad Badawi the Ex-Prime Minister of also greatly emphasized the significance of Malaysians engagement in a lifelong as well as continuous learning to gain the value of the knowledge. Malaysian government and the Prime Minister believe that entrenching and inserting lifelong learning into the Malaysian culture will profit human and material expansion of Malaysia. Till-date, there are only few studies that have evaluated the effectiveness of this strategy. Previously, research on Hotel Industry in Penang State, found that hotel managers do believed OL was important for them to remain competitive and the implementation was in fact still quite limited. Given that Malaysia is working toward Vision 2020 (which is a vision of what the nation wants to achieve by 2020) that stresses the importance of being ever ready to respond to challenges strategies that promote learning and the ability to change have a lot to offer.

The launched of NJOI television program channel in 2010 by Astro which is the first Malaysia's free satellite TV for everyone to share and enjoy was strongly supported by Malaysia Prime Minister, Dato' Seri Najib bin Tun Abdul Razak in supporting e-Knowledge and life-long learning among the Malaysian. He said, "Knowledge is a very important component of any highly progressive society and it is the foundation upon which a nation of excellence is built. Giving the Rakyat (people) access to a wealth of information is

critical in producing multi-talented, highly skilled, creative and innovative workforce necessary to build a knowledge-based economy towards becoming a high-income nation". This is one of the evidences showed government seriousness in equipping the nation with knowledge for our country to progress towards achieving the Vision 2020.

**Organizational learning:** Initially, organizational learning was considered by Argyris (1977) as a tool that could be used to detect and correct errors in an organization. However, this definition has become enriched over the years grow to be more ingenious and inventive as a result of global knowledge and technology developments. Further, knowledge on how learning can be embedded in organizations and the results of practical experience mean that organizational learning has moved well beyond just being about error detection and at present it has been seen as a central part tactic for achieving the organization's goals, mission and vision (Alavi *et al.*, 2014; Granerud and Rocha, 2011; Savolainen and Haikonen, 2007).

Many of the articles on organizational learning discuss learning as a process, method or type of learning (Campbell and Armstrong, 2013; Dodgson, 1993; Huber, 1991; Fiol and Lyles, 1985). There are differences on organizational learning definitions since 1977 which easily lead to misunderstanding and it would be beneficial to briefly trail the evolution of the definitions (Farrell, 1999). For instance, Fiol and Lyles (1985) claimed that in order to assist the development process of conduct, the device that can be used by the organizations is OL. However, Levitt and March (1988) and Nevis *et al.* (1995) perceive it as a prospect and likelihood to learn from the precedent so that the organization can sustain or upgrade performance.

The key to changes in performance extend beyond the areas of technical and material operations to assist behavioural change (Huber, 1991).

Garvin (1993) pointed out that the behaviour of employees is modified via a process of creating, acquiring and transferring the knowledge while Stata (1992) said employees' behaviour modification can be attained by sharing the knowledge with others. Hence, others opined that OL is a knowledge dissemination process too (Sinkula, 1994; Slater and Narver, 1995). At the organizational, team and individual level each of the professional, behavioural and technical processes assist continuous learning (Jashapara, 1993). Levels are important as for Miller (1996) points out, the implementers and decision makers need to combine for knowledge acquisition processes to be effective. In addition, Miller

(1996) stressed that theory understanding will not be equally the same as the process of execution in real life setting.

OL is a broadly established and growing strategy as proposed and claimed in the past literature. This expansion is occurring because implementing learning strategies allows organizations to depict on their inner pool of information and knowledge to perform efficient and effective operations. Many industries in Malaysia are by now well recognized in the worldwide marketplace, it seems that research into whether or not organizational learning is understood and the strategies are being utilized, seems timely. Clearly, having an excellent thoughtful of the concepts and a positive perception of OL is essential if the organizations are motivated and positive to apply practically the learning strategies. This research is aimed to test organizations' reliability in term of implementation level of this besides exploring the respondents' perceptions. Based on Malaysian understanding supported by little review of literature, imperatively generated two research questions which are as follows: What is the Malaysian understanding of 'organizational learning'? Do practitioners and academics make a distinction between organizational learning and training and development?

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study used qualitative methodology and the data was gathered via the process of in-depth interviews. A broad cross-section of respondents was chosen from academia and government organizations as well as the health and manufacturing sectors. Respondents were either from human resources managers, executives or academics. In all there were 38 respondents participated in the study. Of these 38 respondents gave consent for the interviews to be recorded. Thirty five tapes of the interviews were usable but three were unusable due to recording problems. The respondents' backgrounds information is presented in the Table 1.

Majority of respondents as showed in Table 1 were from the manufacturing sector (51.43%) followed by the government (25.71%), academia (14.29%) and the health sectors (8.57%). Of the respondents, 69% are male and 31% are female. The respondents hold varieties of positions such as Professor, Lecturer, Administrator, Director, Assistant Director, Manager and Executive. All respondents from the industries were in the Human Resources area while academic respondents were from the Management School and Head of Faculty where there were involved directly in the management.

Table 1: Respondents' backgrounds

Industries	Respondents		Positions	Gender	
	Number	Percentage		Female	Male
Academia	5	14.29	Professor/Lecturer	3	2
Government	9	25.71	Administrator/HR Director	4	5
			HR Asst. Director		
			HR Manager		
Health	3	8.57	HR Executive	1	2
			HR Manager		
Manufacturing	18	51.43	HR Executive		
			HR Director	3	15
			HR Manager		
			HR Executive		
Total	35	100.00		11 (31.43%)	24 (68.57%)

**Procedure:** The respondents were selected using a purposive sampling. Their names was identified from the list produced by Federation of Malaysian Manufacturers as for the academic, it was from the staff directory while others are taken from the telephone directory. Identified organizations and respondents were called in advance to explain about the study and making the appointment for personal interview. The interviews were recorded in order to make verbatim process easier and to make sure no information missed out while the interview process was conducted.

The data was analysed based on the questions interviewed and sorted into themes and used of Nudist version 6 (N6) Software is to generate the regularity of discussion on every theme. Nevertheless, not all themes discussed in the interviews were detected by the software because of the usage of dissimilar vocabulary or meandering diction even though, they carried the same meanings. For these reasons, areas of discussion that were found to be unconvincing were revisited and further information was extracted physically. This will further assist to come out with a thorough analysis besides ensuring the luxury of the data and any noteworthy contributions would be identified and captured. In addition, meaningfulness and reliability of the data analysis and discussion can be enhanced.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

**Research outcomes:** Using the procedure described above the frequency of emerged themes were categorized and presented below in Table 2.

Respondents provided definitions based on their understanding of OL, adding some richness to the current definitions in the Western literature. These definitions are analysed according to industry. Then, the similarities and differences among the inputs are evaluated. Finally, based on the overall analysis a generalised definition of OL amongst Malaysians is developed.

**Health industry:** Three respondents, two males and one female represented the health industry and contributed to

Table 2: Summary of interview's feedback

Interview question	Themes gathered	Frequency of discussion
What is your understanding of 'Organizational Learning'?	Definition of OL	34
	Distinction between T&D and OL	35

8.57% of respondents. These respondents viewed OL as having the same function as T&D and assumed OL was about having a learning culture. The overall understanding of OL within this sector is expressed below:

OL is where you train, develop and improve continuously, according to the set values of the organization to move forward and become professional which is similar to the learning culture. Besides that OL is aiming at three aspects of the corporate culture that are love and care, team work and professionalism” (Health respondent)

In addition, the ‘back to basics’ principle is applied within this industry. This was explained as people being continuously trained and developed to improve their knowledge so that professionalism is enhanced and careers are developed. Consequently, in the Health industry, love, care, teamwork and professionalism provide a focus not only for OL, they also become embedded in the corporate culture of an organization.

**Academics industry:** Five academicians consisting of three females and two males were interviewed. The academic respondents were selected from various disciplines such as Management Information Systems, Entrepreneurship, Strategic Management, Human Resources and Operations Management. Their inputs were collated and summarised according to similarities and points of meaning. Their understanding of OL varied and included comments relating to the culture, opportunities for knowledge acquisition or viewing OL as a tool that organizations could use as is discussed below.

Two respondents claimed that OL is really about a programmed culture within an organization that encourages the employees to learn from experts and peers. The culture of learning needs to be adopted and implemented from the strategic level through all the layers of the entire organization (A1 and A2). One respondent perceived OL as an opportunity for the organization that has implications not only for the work culture but for procedures, systems and information. This respondent, A2 said:

OL has to provide an environment that would enable the employees to think and learn from the mission statement, the symbols in the organization, the artifacts which are in the form of project themes, labels, books and publications and e-mail information (Academic2 respondent)

In terms of knowledge acquisition, another respondent believed OL is a way to store, accumulate and formulate ideas as well as knowledge and skills that are obtained within and outside the organization. The accumulation and formulation of knowledge will result in a better or more positive attitude among employees to help the organization do better. In addition, OL will assist in dealing with changes in the organization. The fifth respondent, A5, commented:

OL is a new tool used to cope with changes in the working environment especially changes in the technology (Academic5 respondent)

In short, the academics looked at OL as “a culture within”, “an opportunity”, “a way to store knowledge and skills”, “a new tool to cope with changes” and a way to “learn from the organization and develop expertise”. These understandings indicate that OL affects organizations and can bring benefits for the long-term survival of the organization. In addition, it prepares the organization for being more competitive in its own industry. Active learning within or outside the organization will ensure employees are more knowledgeable, competent, ready for change and prepared to take on new challenges in their daily work.

**Manufacturing industry:** For the manufacturing industry, seventeen respondents, in the position of Director, Manager and Executive levels from local and multinational companies were interviewed. The foreign multinational companies are from United States, Germany, Canada, Taiwan and Japan besides few Malaysian companies. Based on their positions, these respondents are highly experienced and possessed comprehensible understanding on the topic. Nonetheless, in defining OL,

the manufacturing respondents had a different level of understanding. They addressed OL as a continuous process of knowledge acquisition and skills enhancement, T&D activities, change process and a long term strategy or as a system.

In referring to OL as a system, three of the respondents opined that OL is a unique and complicated system. Depending on the work environment, OL could be either an ineffective process which produces tiny impact or it can be a powerful tool for change if it is embedded within a positive and beneficial culture in the organization. Another respondent described the system as:

...a formal education program like a diploma, degree, masters and PhD that is generally providing people with the thinking skills to develop the organization by looking at business opportunities and taking advantage of the skills and knowledge acquired (Manufacturing3 respondent)

The majority of these respondents (6) agreed that OL is a process of knowledge acquisition and skills enhancement which continuously occur. This requires the organization to administer the knowledge inside as well as cheer the employees to vigorously learn, so they get and distribute knowledge, growth and pile up the competencies gaps. Continuous learning ensures successful and proficient operations as well as ongoing enhancement and expansion attained through formal or informal methods. Another respondent commented that:

OL is a process of knowledge acquisition to enhance personal competencies and skills to be able to produce knowledge upon requirement in the daily work through attending in-house training, group training, instructor-led training, e-Learning, OJT, seminars, workshops and the application of mentoring systems or through succession planning (Manufacturing1 respondent)

OL was also suggested as a means to increase shareholders value, besides the enhancement of employees' knowledge and skill and the performance of the organization:

OL is where the majority of the employees will learn only one major key area to carry out the ultimate goal which is to improve the overall performance of the organization and to increase the share holder value (Manufacturing5 respondent)

In relation to T&D activities, three respondents claimed that OL is closely related to Organizational Development (OD) and T&D activities such as the On Job Training (OJT). The implementation of OL, OD and T&D should be integrated to generate changes in the culture of work and warrant enhancement inside the organization. Similar to the academic viewpoint, the other two manufacturing industry respondents claimed that OL affects current needs and requirements to the change process within the organization. Three respondents indicated OL was a long term strategy for example:

OL is a very long learning strategy that involves three ranges of learning process: short term, middle term and long term to achieve the company's objectives such as mergers and acquisition (Manufacturing11 respondent)

Overall, the manufacturing respondents viewed OL as closely related with T&D in that they functioned in the same way to extend employees' knowledge, skills and expertise. Despite claiming OL is unique and encompasses a large scope in organizations the respondents also indicated that OL needs an activity or process that inculcates into the organization's culture. Overall, OL was viewed as a beneficial tool for the survival of the organization and for keeping up current performance as well as managing changes as they occur from time to time.

**Government department:** Eight government employees contributed to discussions on the definition and understanding of OL. These respondents were supportive and enthusiastic about the issue. They were familiar with the concept of OL and some had been involved in OL implementation processes. All viewed OL as an opportunity for employee improvement, knowledge acquisition and stimulating a continuous learning process. Focusing on employee improvement, two respondents indicated that OL provided the opportunity to increase employees' capability and capacity for knowledge and skills and this improved the organization. For example, G1 said:

OL is a very important process in creating and upgrading the staff's competitiveness in terms of innovation, processes, development and technology, especially under globalization (Government1 respondent)

In regards to knowledge acquisition, one respondent claimed OL also requires gathering internal and external information. The information is kept in databases so it is accessible to anyone in the organization for example, via

Information Technology (IT) or a booklet. Another respondent suggested that information gathered should include data on staff training programs, employees' qualifications and experience, their current duties and responsibilities to facilitate aligning their work with the mission of the organization. Another claimed OL should stimulate employees' desire for continuous learning so they were motivated to pick up their own knowledge without being dictated to by the organization or management.

As a whole, most of the government respondents said that OL is a process of knowledge enhancement as well as learning new skills to improve expertise for the betterment of the organization. They suggested that knowledge improvement should be either voluntary or arranged by the organization through training and or knowledge development programs. This group saw OL as a continuous process of information gathering and dissemination aimed at continuous organizational improvement and enhancing employee competitiveness. The variations in defining OL reflect the different experiences of respondents in terms of whether or not OL had been implemented in their organization.

**OL (the distinction between OL and T&D):** Most of the respondents in the industry survey viewed Organizational Learning (OL) as similar to Training and Development (T&D). Therefore, this question was specifically addressed in the in-depth interviews to see if these respondents distinguished between the two concepts. The in-depth interview revealed that the majority of respondents did distinguish between the two concepts (OL and T&D), although, a minority interpreted them as being the same. The data was then analysed according to industry sectors (health, academic, manufacturing and government) to see if perceptions of OL and T&D differed. The results were compared and contrasted to find points of difference and or shared understanding. The health respondents were unable to distinguish between OL and T&D whereas the academic, manufacturing and government respondents did make distinctions and these are discussed as:

**Academic industry:** Five of the academic's respondents identified three main differences between OL and T&D and these were:

- Training and development was viewed as a tool used in OL implementation and operation
- Training and development was a formal way of learning or acquiring knowledge
- Training and development is aimed at individual employee skill enhancement and knowledge development

The five were unanimous that T&D was a tool to implement and operationalise OL in the organization. For example:

T&D is actually part of OL and a tool used in order to implement OL while OL is more of a culture within the organization (Academic2 respondent)

The respondents claimed the second point that makes OL different from T&D is that T&D is a formal way of learning or knowledge acquisition while OL is more than that. For example respondent A3 supported the view put forward by A4 who said:

...formal sources like courses or training to acquire all those (required) competencies (skills and knowledge). On the other hand, OL can happen at anytime, anywhere and from other sources such as reading, communication and the organizational bulletin it can take place informally (Academic4 respondent)

The respondents also said that T&D is more about individual knowledge acquisition and skills enhancement, rather than considering the whole organization performance. This understanding was shared by respondents A2, A3, A4 and A5 and explained by A1 as:

Training and development is just providing training to improve skills and to change old habits of production to increase productivity. Specifically, training is for the job at hand and development is where the employees are trained for the next level or the same level but in a different area or across functional activities. But OL has to provide some kind of environment that keeps all employees on track and abreast with the current changes in the environment. In addition, OL would allow the employees to think and anticipate the future direction of the organization, i.e. where the organization is heading to in 5 years time (Academic1 respondent)

Overall, the academic respondents viewed T&D as a contributor to OL but more as a technical process of development guided by the organization, rather than free thinking knowledge acquisition. They considered OL had a much wider scope and was more flexible in terms of time, sources, places and occasions for knowledge acquisition and for influencing organizational culture.

**Manufacturing industry:** Sixteen participants responded to the discussion regarding the distinction between OL

and T&D. The discussion is constructed around five major differences and these are that training and development is:

- An old approach and subset to OL
- A formal basis for major learning activities
- A department
- A tool
- Focuses on employees' individual skill development and knowledge attainment

The point about 'T&D being an old approach and subset to OL' was that T&D is adopted by the organization to operate the learning activities and therefore is a forerunner to OL. A number of respondents (M1, M2 and M5) also suggested that T&D is the formal basis for major learning activities that happen in the organization. For example:

T&D is more focused on the business needs, mission, vision and goals of the company, besides employee skills and career development (Manufacturing1 respondent)

The business needs, the mission, vision and goal of the company are formal matters for all organizations which is why training activities need to be planned and organised and often need a specific department. The implementation of T&D departments in almost all organizations in Malaysia, lead to the perception that:

T&D is the department which administers the training activities, i.e., getting the program's approved, sending employees for training and for sourcing training programs and training providers (Manufacturing8 respondent)

Many respondents (M4, M6, M11 and M13) viewed T&D as the tool organizations use to implement organizational learning. For example, the respondents claimed that:

T&D is a tool to identify the employees' needs to drive employees' development for some other job either in the same level or a higher level (Manufacturing6 respondent)

Another respondent said:

Training is a method a tool to implement OL in-line with the companies' vision and mission to develop the staff competency through formal and informal training and OJT (Manufacturing10 respondent)

Training and development was viewed as a tool to facilitate the right course for the right candidate at the right time as determined by the head of department or manager. For example, one respondent (M13) explained that training teaches employees so as to fill existing knowledge or skill gaps and could be either a “nice to have or a must have” because employee development should be a conscious effort to chart the career path of their human resources.

However, most respondents agreed that T&D is focused on employees’ individual skill development and knowledge attainment. While, this understanding closely relates to the OL objectives, the scope of activity focuses on individuals to promote skill development and knowledge attainment. For example:

T&D is where the skills and knowledge are provided to the people through the major learning activities happening in the organization (Manufacturing9 respondent)

Knowledge acquisition is important as part of the learning process as a way of making the organization more competitive. On the other hand, the respondents stressed that T&D is very closely related to OL because implementation is followed by changes in the work culture as well as operation improvement. Learning becomes a part of the culture so employees are self-motivated to gain greater knowledge for self-development. As a tool T&D helps an organization become a learning organization. It is a means to motivate employees to seek and acquire knowledge to make them more competitive and to add value. T&D is used to consolidate learning activities and fill knowledge gaps to help a company achieve its mission and vision. However, OL aims to prepare the organization for all sorts of challenges and for the long-term survival.

**Government respondents:** All Government respondents (9) highlighted similar distinctions between OL and T&D; they viewed T&D as traditional and a tool that brings about individual skill enhancement and knowledge acquisition. These respondents also perceived that learning or knowledge acquisition is only acknowledged in practice, if it is implemented through the T&D department or approved training activities, particularly when the training program is certified. Training and development was viewed as a source or channel to import knowledge into the organizations’ members and as such was an intermediate tool for gaining explicit knowledge. For instance, to support this argument, one respondent (G2) said; “Training is suitable for immediate and ad hoc learning” and another respondent (G5) claimed, “T&D is a mediating tool towards OL”.

Similar to the academics and manufacturing respondents, the government respondents also viewed T&D as being directed at individual employee skill development and knowledge acquisition. This view is expressed as follows:

T&D is part of OL since learning is the core competencies and it is essential for the staff to learn management skills as well as soft skills. Training is provided for the staff to plan and develop their career in the organization. Training is more focused on the program while development is more focused on individual (Government9 respondent)

In conclusion, this group also referred to T&D as a traditional way of acquiring knowledge through a formal learning process. This also indicated that an emphasis on self-improvement and career development make the existence of T&D significant but OL achieves more than just that objective. Organizational learning should be a catalyst for improvement in all aspects such as productivity, work efficiency, innovation, knowledge capability and capacity and process performance. As a result, OL makes customers more satisfied with the services and products of the organization (Fig. 1 and 2).

**The distinction between OL and T&D:** The overall understanding shows that the government, academic and

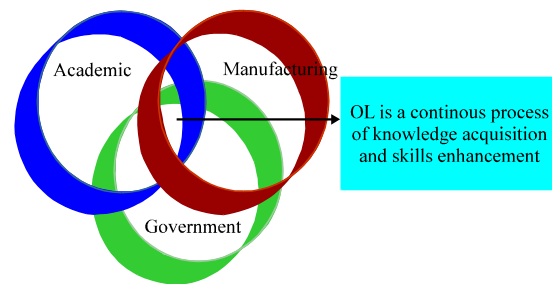


Fig. 1: The shared understanding among academic, manufacturing and government respondents

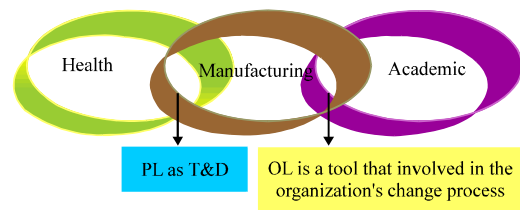


Fig. 2: The shared understanding among health and manufacturing industry and academic and manufacturing industry



manufacturing respondents held similar views about OL and T&D. The five common themes that emerged were that training and development is:

- A more traditional subset of OL
- Is the formal base for major learning activities
- Is usually managed and implemented through a discreet department
- Is merely a tool
- Is focused on individual skill development and knowledge attainment

The Malaysian respondents could make distinctions between OL and T&D'. Despite their different working experiences, qualifications and backgrounds, the respondents had a shared and rich understanding of the distinction between OL and T&D. This understanding reflected their exposure, gained locally or overseas to international practices. These findings suggest that Malaysian businesses not only can distinguish between T&D and OL but much of the discussion implies they practice OL to varying degrees.

### **CONCLUSION**

This study explored the understanding of organizational learning and the learning strategies practiced by Malaysian organizations. The results suggest Malaysians are generally aware of the importance of organizational learning as a concept and value learning as they realize knowledge helps determine the future and direction of an organization. While definitions of OL varied, it became clear that some Malaysian organizations are practicing a variety of OL strategies, even though they regarded these as normal T&D activities. It is clear that there is room for considerable improvement in the education and adoption of OL in all sectors. Being asked to distinguish between T&D and OL made respondents realise that these are not the same. Learning as a concept and organizational learning differ and this was acknowledged by the respondents in the study.

### **LIMITATIONS**

This study is subjective in nature. Respondents' willingness, honesty and sincerity are among the factors that will influence the reliability of the findings. Furthermore, organizational learning is relatively new issue for Malaysia and as became evident in the study that some managers had limited coverage to and thoughtful of organizational learning. The variability of respondents understanding and interpretations increase the risk of sample bias. It could be that in the wider

community those who choose not to participate in the research had a slighter indulgent, so the level of understanding might be much lower than this study suggests. Alternatively, the indulgent might be evenly as high or higher in some sectors of the broader business community, so the results should be accepted with some carefulness.

Moreover, this study has only examined the perceptions of participants from four industries namely manufacturing, government, academic and healthcare. Different industries may be better or less informed. Likewise, biasness may occur among the industry groups depending on the participant's knowledge. Moreover, people may expect better understanding of the academicians on OL theories while the conceptualization of the practitioners may be prejudiced to the need to apply the theory into practice. Representation across the groups varied and this could also bias the results. Overall the results obtained are strongly influenced by the manufacturing respondents which may against their industry's viewpoint or different sectors understanding across the communities.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS**

The results of the study have shown that Malaysians do understand and are able to effectively define OL within the context of Malaysians work environment. The collective definitions or understandings of OL identified that the academic, manufacturing and government respondents understanding of OL had some overlap as each viewed OL as a continuous process of knowledge acquisition and skill enhancement as is represented in Fig. 1. This understanding gives the best match to the definition given by Western scholars like Garvin (1993) and Jashapara (1993).

The differences among respondents in relation to defining OL can be seen in Fig. 2. While, the health and manufacturing respondents identified that OL was related to T&D on the other hand, similar to Huber (1991) and Williams (2001), the manufacturing and academic respondents viewed OL is a tool to aid the organization when it is involved in change. Taken together, the results suggest that overall there is shallow understanding and limited exposure to the organizational learning concept.

These definitions show that most of the Malaysian respondents were able to define OL in a broad way. As a group, the health industry respondents were the least able to distinguish OL from T&D. It also needs to be acknowledged that across all respondents there were a small number from the manufacturing and government sectors who were unable to distinguish between T&D and OL.

This research creates a good foundation for future research. As an exploratory study it opens the way for more specific research to take place. For example, instead of just asking about Malaysian understanding on OL in the future the research could apply a quantitative approach to research on Malaysian organizations learning strategies, frequency of usage of the strategies and confirm the use of various methodologies. Employee satisfaction, productivity, commitment and innovation could also be researched to discover and capitalize on the patterns of organizational learning and knowledge management that are emerging or are most suitable to Malaysia.

This research could be extended by increasing the sample size of industries and escalating the respondents. As the current study has only selected four industries but Malaysia has bigger range of industries such as banking, plantation, education and construction, plus considering the significance of these situational contingencies, study requires to be extended to other industries to establish better generalization of how Organizational Learning (OL) can be rightly executed in Malaysia. Improved understanding of the processes, strategies and outcomes will be obtained when the research is expanded across wider scope of industries. The study on the outcome of different roles of the Organizational Learning (OL) can be studied in the future research. For instance, the Chairman or senior management position in the organization need to obtain the right information to examine the progress as well as new strategies execution besides having great influence on the decision making process. In definite, it requires their reliable understanding and information to the issues. Understanding and knowing these will provide some suggestions of how Organizational Learning (OL) may contribute to satisfaction, performance and innovation within Malaysia.

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