Chapter 2
Use of Information Technology in Organizational Learning: Effective Practices of Award-Winning Organizations

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ABSTRACT

Education and development in the workplace that promotes continual improvement is vital for sustainability and performance excellence for 21st century organizations. Likewise, organizational learning has become a focal point for organizations to quickly adapt to global markets and dynamic economies. Using two theoretical frameworks, the 2010 and 2011 National Baldrige Award Winners’ applications and websites are examined to better understand how technology can support organizational learning. Information technologies are classified through the use of Huber’s (1991) constructs, while Argyris and Schön’s (1978) double-loop learning theory becomes a foundation for examining continuous improvement within organizations. Results indicate technology is an integral part of the Baldrige Award Winners’ day-to-day processes and the improvement thereof is a focal point for these organizations. While technology itself does not create a winning organization, appropriate use of technology enables an organization to track the processes that lead to customer satisfaction, thus enabling the organization to be both innovative and agile in the global workplace.

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INTRODUCTION

Knowledge and learning are at the core of performance excellence for 21st century organizations. Within the United States, a partnership of the public and private sectors to promote organizational excellence, the Baldrige Performance Excellence Program, was founded as an award program by Congress in 1987. The purpose of the Baldrige program is threefold—to “identify and recognize role-model businesses,” “establish criteria for evaluating improvement efforts,” and “disseminate and share best practices.” These points support the Baldrige program’s primary goal of enhancing US business competitiveness in a global economy. Included within the award criteria is a focus on organizational learning (US Department of Commerce, 2012). This chapter examines recent Baldrige Award winners’ applications and public websites to investigate technologies as used for learning within the organizations. An overview of how the Baldrige program focuses on learning opens this chapter and is then followed by the theoretical frameworks for organizational learning in relationship to the Baldrige criteria. The program criteria and theoretical frameworks reviewed become the foundation for exploring technologies currently available for use in organizational learning. The technologies used by the Baldrige Award winning organizations to promote learning for performance excellence follow in a subsequent section. The conclusion of the chapter summarizes important takeaways for organizations and looks at the impact of technology use on education and professional development.

BALDRIGE AWARD CRITERIA AND LEARNING

The Baldrige criteria examine organizations via a systems approach. The application for the award includes an organizational profile in which important factors key to the organization performance are described. Following the profile, seven categories that comprise the model are addressed by the applicants. The first six categories (1. Leadership, 2. Strategic Planning, 3. Customer Focus, 4. Measurement, Analysis, and Knowledge Management, 5. Workforce Focus, and 6. Operation Focus) concentrate on processes, or the integration of people, tools, and techniques used to create the resulting product or services. Category 7, Results, concentrates on the organizational performance outcomes.

Within the process categories, award applicants describe, and Baldrige examiners evaluate, the processes based on four factors: approach, deployment, learning, and integration. While approach, deployment, and integration may have clearer definitions, a look at how Baldrige defines learning is needed. Learning encompasses “refining your approach through cycles of evaluation and improvement,” “encouraging breakthrough change to your approach through innovation,” and “sharing refinements and innovations with other relevant work units and processes in your organization” (US Department of Commerce, 2011, p. 66). The criteria guide further notes that:

[a]chieving the highest levels of organizational performance requires a well-executed approach to organizational and personal learning that includes sharing knowledge via systematic processes. Organizational learning includes both continuous improvement of existing approaches and significant change or innovation, leading to new goals and approaches (US Department of Commerce, 2011, p. 51).

By embedding learning into the daily operations at the organizational level, results can include improved products and value to customers, new business models and opportunities, reduction in errors and cycle times, as well as increasing effective use of resources (US Department of Commerce, 2011).