A Phantasmagoria: Does Learning and Development Support Organizational Performance?

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Abstract: Background: Organizational leadership authorizes significant investments in Learning and Development (L&D) to align and develop employee competence with strategy execution to accomplish organizational performance. Nonetheless, strategy execution fails – endangering the well-being of organizations, their employees, customers, and society. Research reports a persistent problem, namely, the absence of suitably competent employees to execute strategy – a phantasmagoria that demands examination. As part of a larger study, this paper reports on organizations' investments in employee competence development by aligning L&D and effective strategy execution to accomplish organizational performance. Our research question was: "How do organizations align L&D with effective strategy execution to manage organizational performance?" Limited empirical information on the topic compelled an exploratory approach. To *gain understanding*, we combined literature on strategy, L&D, and operations into a comprehensive integrated conceptual framework (Figure 1). Figure 1 clearly demonstrates how employee competence aligns with effective strategy execution to accomplish organizational performance. Figure 1 served as the basis for our exploratory online survey, which collected extensive standardized data from a purposively selected sample. Responses met norms for exploratory surveys and trustworthy criteria. We descriptively analyzed the data. The findings suggest a feckless L&D and organizational strategy alignment, which returns performance shortfalls. Responses to an open-ended question revealed that respondents neglected customer value, the core rationale for an organization's existence and essence of strategy. Consequently, no amount of L&D expenditure would align or develop employee competence to create and deliver customer value. Contribution: Our conceptual framework unambiguously aligns L&D and organizational performance – an idiosyncratic contribution. Our framework propels leadership to *rethink* L&D and *practically* craft an effective strategy based on customer value. The cross-sectional design limits generalizations. We recommend further studies to permit generalizations.

Keywords: Aligning L&D and organizational performance, Organizational strategy, Customer value, Integrated employee competence measurement, L&D investments in employee competence, Exploratory survey

1. Introduction

Phantasmagoria … what a bizarre title! Learning and Development (L&D) aims to align and build employee competence, i.e., knowledge, skills, experience, attitudes, needs, and aspirations, with effective strategy execution (CIPD, 2025b; Garavan et al, 2020; Hayden, 2024). Strategy intends to create and deliver value and is the means to accomplish successful organizational performance expressed in financial and non-financial results (Collier and Evans, 2020; Fayol, 1916[2013]; Thompson et al, 2024). Phantasmagoria means dream-like visions, real or imagined, like those seen in a dream (vocabulary.com). Is this really happening? How can L&D be a phantasmagoria when organizations spend large sums on L&D?

The global L&D market was valued at US$361.5 billion in 2023 and is estimated to reach US$805.6 billion in 2035 (alliedmarketresearch.com, 2024). Reports show that L&D investments emphasize interpersonal competence development to improve behavior (Garavan et al, 2021; Gifford and Wietrak, 2022). This L&D focus ensues from (a) poor interpersonal relationships that derail organizational performance and (b) measuring employee competence mainly at the tactical/input and activity/operational-processes measurement levels, typifying efficiency (Kahn, 1992; Nienaber and McNeill, 2022).

Notwithstanding massive L&D spending, research reports a persistent strategy execution failure – imperiling organizations, employees, customers, and society (Bourgeois and Brodwin, 1984; Holm, Kringelum and Anand, 2025). Among many, the recurring reason for the strategy execution failure is the physical or psychological unavailability of suitably competent employees to execute strategy (CIPD, 2018; Kahn, 1992; Mankins and Steele, 2005). This apparent *phantasmagoria* needs clarification.

Vision in a fog is a daunting task. Limited empirical research on the topic demonstrates that organizations do not know how employee competence links to strategy execution that produces organizational performance (CIPD, 2018; Hamilton and Sodeman, 2020; Levenson, 2018). Thus, employees are deployed in positions that foil their competence, resulting in (a) low levels of employee engagement, (b) alienation from work, others, and

their organizations, and (c) ill-being, preventing them from performing at their best, (d) and derails organizational performance (Gallup, 2026; Kahn, 1992; Nienaber and McNeill, 2022; Taylor, 1911[2022]). In contrast, ignited competence incentivizes *innovation* that boosts *employee engagement,* which in turn generates organizational performance (Gallup, 2026; Hogan and Sherman, 2020; Kahn, 1992).

The mismatch between employee competence and strategy execution suggests a flawed L&D needs identification. Participant feedback, such as (a) misaligned L&D and organizational goals and (b) inappropriate training content, corroborates the ineffectiveness of L&D interventions (Brassey, Christensen and van Dam, 2019; Gallup, 2026; Garavan et al, 2020; Glaveski, 2019). Thus, some L&D investments are not beneficial as they fail to align or build employee competence to create and deliver value in pursuit of organizational performance, as evidenced by the strategy execution failure.

Behavioral development interventions, stemming from dominating efficiency measurement, are inadequate to improve strategy execution to accomplish organizational performance. Effectiveness, manifest in strategic-level measurement that gauges outputs and outcomes, is often overlooked. Effectiveness matters most in strategy execution to accomplish organizational performance (CIPD, 2025a; Hamilton and Sodeman, 2020; Nienaber and McNeill, 2022). Strategic level measurement primarily reflects competence in the business and leadership domains (cf. Hogan and Warrenfeltz, 2003; Levenson, 2018; Nienaber and McNeill, 2022).

A lack of empirical evidence demonstrating how L&D propels effective strategy execution to accomplish organizational performance (cf. Garavan et al, 2021) raises the question: "How do organizations align L&D and effective strategy execution to manage organizational performance?" To gain understanding, we explored organizations' investments in employee competence development by aligning L&D with effective strategy execution to accomplish organizational performance. This question forms part of a larger, ongoing study focusing on an integrated competence measurement system ensuring successful strategy execution to attain organizational performance.

We empirically studied this question using synthesized literature on human competence measurement, strategy, and operations to illuminate L&D as a means to effective strategy execution to accomplish organizational performance (Collier and Evans, 2020; Garavan et al, 2021; Thompson et al, 2024). We present the synthesized literature in a comprehensive, integrative conceptual framework (Figure 1) that guided our study. Figure 1 visually demonstrates the L&D, strategy, operations, and organizational performance alignment. It shows how employee competence creates value through activities that convert inputs through processes into outputs in support of culminating outcomes, representing organizational performance. Figure 1 includes both efficiency and effectiveness measures that reinforce creating and delivering value through competitive advantage – the foundation of a sound strategy that facilitates accomplishing organizational performance (Porter, 1985; Thompson et al, 2024).

Research identified L&D and organizational performance alignment as a crucial area needing clarification (Brassey, Christensen and van Dam, 2019; Garavan et al, 2020:70; Garavan et al, 2021:94). Our research findings unambiguously demonstrate the L&D-competitive advantage-strategy-organizational performance alignment, which has not been done before. Our Figure 1 conceptual framework enables: (a) organizational leadership to make evidence-based decisions to overcome the strategy execution failure by developing employee competence through L&D interventions, reassigning employees, or hiring the requisite competence and (b) HR professionals to fulfill their role as strategic partner to ensure suitably competent employees are available to execute strategy to accomplish organizational performance (cf. Garavan et al, 2021; Nienaber and McNeill, 2022; Taylor, 1911[2022]).

2. Conceptual Framework: Aligning L&D and Strategy to Accomplish Organizational Performance

The purpose of an organization is to: (a) offer innovative customer-sought value, whether economic (e.g., cost), functional (e.g., features and benefits), psychological (e.g., availability, memorable experience), or a combination which is derived from consuming the value-offer, (b) provide employment opportunities to societal members, enhancing their self-esteem and dignity, and (c) create wealth (Drucker, 1954; Nienaber and McNeill, 2022; O'Boyle, 2023; Thompson et al, 2024). Leadership is accountable for all of these (a-c). *Organizational culture* enables innovation that unleashes employee engagement, which generates organizational performance and yields customer satisfaction (Gallup, 2026; Hogan and Sherman, 2020; Kahn, 1992; O'Boyle, 2023). Strategy sets the organizational direction, safeguards value creation and delivery, and simultaneously seeks to attain the organizational goals that constitute performance.

A sound strategy is founded on *competitive advantage,* namely (a) delivering differentially better innovative customer-sought value than competitors (b) in chosen markets (c) by suitably competent employees who are deployed in positions that utilize their competence autonomously in creating and delivering value (d) through the mechanism '*structural dimensions of organization for implementing strategy*' that (e) arranges division of labor and integration of effort, and (f) synchronizes key actions (strategy execution) with strategic intent (strategy formulation) (Barney, 1991; Chandler, 1962; Puranam, 2018; Porter, 1985; Skivington and Daft, 1991; Thompson et al, 2024).

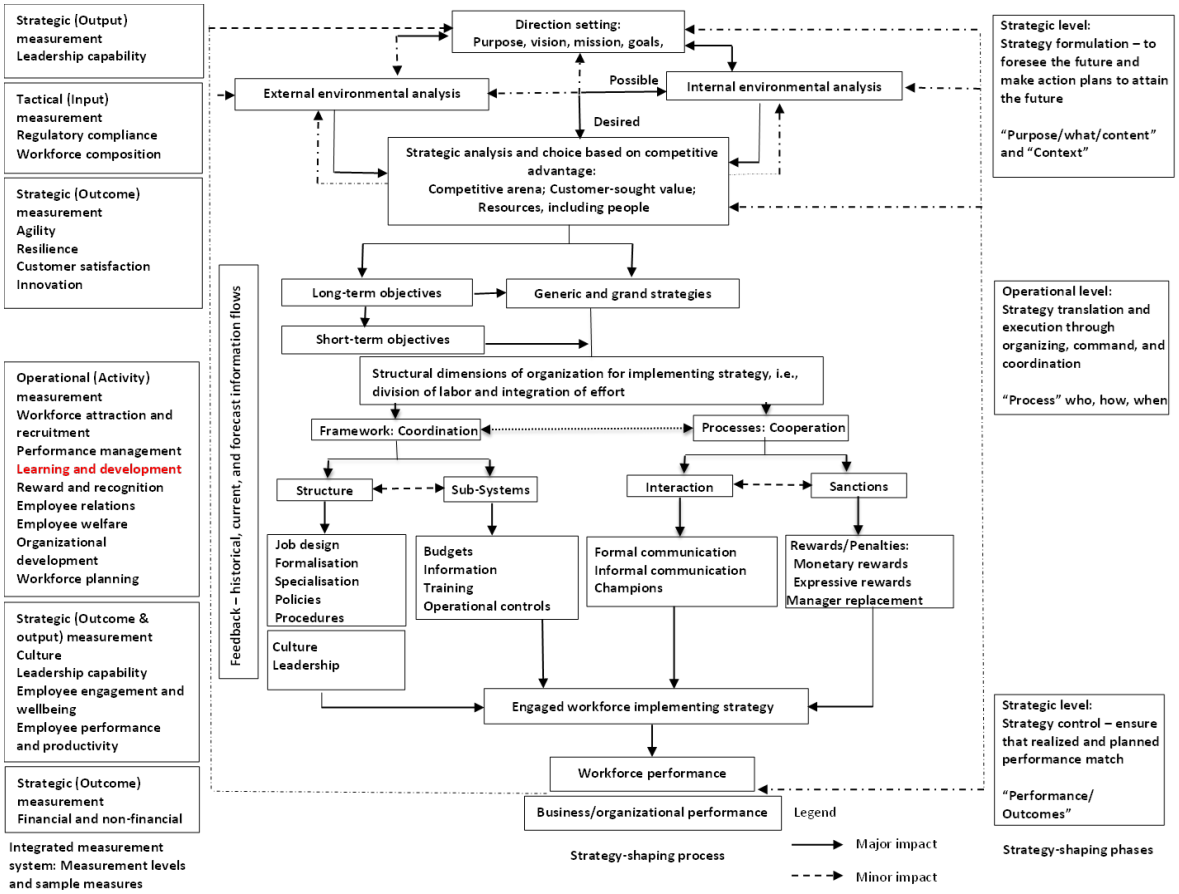
Efficacious organizations use an integrated measurement system for analyzing organizational performance in support of evidence-based decisions to mobilize employee competence in performing value-creating activities (Boudreau and Cascio, 2017; CIPD, 2025a; Hamilton and Sodeman, 2020; Levenson, 2018). Figure 1 does not explicitly label competence. The different measures comprising the integrated measurement system covers competence across the intra-personal, interpersonal, business/technical, and leadership domains, as explained by Hogan and Warrenfeltz (2003) and corroborated by George (2021). Multiple agents in various organizational units typically administer the different competence measures. For example, customer satisfaction is usually measured by the marketing department and L&D by HR or line functions. The dispersed measurement may give rise to a siloed, instead of an integrated, approach to competence measurement, diluting its effectiveness.

L&D, an activity measure at the organizational operational level, is a critical measure aligning employee competence with strategy formulation and execution accomplishing organizational performance. L&D is the systemic and systematic process that (a) analyzes past, current, and future performance needs, (b) followed by design, develop, and implement interventions based on root causes of performance needs, (c) to enhance employee competence – knowledge, capabilities, skills, attitudes, needs, and aspirations necessary (d) to sustain successful organizational performance, and (e) evaluate the success of such interventions in (f) alignment to the organizational strategy and goals, i.e., performance (Brassey, Christensen and van Dam, 2019; CIPD, 2025b; Garavan et al, 2021; Hayden, 2024).

Figure 1 depicts a comprehensive, synthesized conceptual framework that integrates strategy, operations, and L&D, aligned with organizational performance. It shows that strategy is conceived at the organizational strategic level while it materializes at the organizational operational level. Hence, strategy formulation and execution should not be separated, as is often the case (Fayol, 1916[2013]; McNeill and Nienaber, 2025; Stadler et al, 2021; Taylor, 1911[2022]). Figure 1 shows the mechanism '*structural dimensions of organization'* is pivotal in strategy implementation by translating organizational goals into action. Specifically, it arranges (a) division of labor, i.e., task division and task allocation, and (b) integration of effort, i.e., provision of information and rewards (Puranam, 2018) and is critical to L&D. Figure 1 shows that the integrated measurement system accounts for tactical (input), operational (activity-processes), and strategic (outputs and outcomes) competence measurement, all of which are central to the organizational strategy to accomplish performance (Boudreau and Cascio, 2017; CIPD, 2025a; Hamilton and Sodeman, 2020; Levenson, 2018). Each measurement level contains several competence measures for determining value and used according to the judgment of organizations (CIPD, 2025a).

Figure 1 shows an organization as a total integrated open system specifying its dynamic, interacting elements: Inputs, feeding into conversion activities, leading to outputs, in support of culminating outcomes, and feedback. These components account in detail for critical organizational activities pertinent (general) management as described by Fayol's (1916[2013]) Theory of Administration, namely:

- Planning – to foresee the future and draft action plans to realize the future through strategy formulation, execution, and control,
- organizing – to strengthen organizational resources, employee competence and otherwise, to realize the organization's future through strategy translation and execution which is embodied in *structural dimensions of organization for implementing strategy* the mechanism that holds the organization together through division of labor and integration of effort,



Source: Adapted from McNeill and Nienaber (2025)

Figure 1: Integrative conceptual framework aligning strategy, operations, L&D, and organizational performance

- coordination – to harmonize all activities and efforts throughout the organization to ensure its smooth functioning to accomplish organizational performance and is exemplified in the framework structural dimension of organization for executing strategy which galvanizes cooperation,
- command (commensurate to cooperation/relationships) – to guide employees and their interactions or relationships toward realizing the organization's future and is exemplified in the processes structural dimension of organization for executing strategy,
- control – ensure everything occurs as planned.

The total process is underpinned by appropriately transparent and inclusive decision-making and communication to secure organizational performance.

To be successful, organizational leadership needs a thorough knowledge of the business, what its customers value (economic, functional, psychological or combination), employee competence to create and deliver customer-sought value, and constraining environmental variables from the macro-, market-, and micro-environments, e.g., regulatory, market, economic, technological, and sociological factors, that impact desired value delivery, necessitating collaboration of various stakeholders throughout the organization (CIPD, 2025a; Stadler et al, 2021; Thompson et al, 2024).

The aforementioned description suggests competence is intertwined and shown in Figure 1. For example, leadership capability identifies leadership's capacity to (a) set the organizational direction, namely, establish the purpose of the organization based on customer-sought value, develop a vision, mission, goals, and guiding values to deliver customer value, (b) recruit and retain competent employees to create and deliver customer value, (c) influence and align employees towards the common organizational goal, (d) motivate employees to act and take charge of their performance by satisfying their inborn needs to express competence, realize autonomy, and experience relatedness, in alignment with the organizational strategy, and (e) persevere. This description refers to competence in the intra-personal, interpersonal, business/technical, and leadership domains (George, 2021; Hogan and Warrenfeltz, 2003).

3. Employee Competence Measurement

Employee competence required to perform the organizational activities to accomplish organizational performance is reflected in an integrated measurement system which aligns L&D and organizational strategy. Figure 1 illustrates that the measurement levels (tactical, activity-operational, and strategic) are neither consecutive nor distributed according to the corresponding organizational level which complicates employee competence measurement. Figure 1 serves as a guide for leadership, management, L&D specialists, and employees to identify competence needs and introduce relevant development interventions enhancing effective strategy execution to accomplish organizational performance.

Employee competence, pertinent to this paper, relates to crafting a competitive advantage, i.e., delivering differentially better innovative customer-sought value than competitors in chosen markets by suitably competent employees who are deployed in positions that utilize their competence autonomously in creating and delivering value through aligning key actions (strategy execution) with strategic intent (strategy formulation). Competitive advantage is in the business/technical competence domain and signaled in measures of (a) customer satisfaction and (b) resources, specifically employee competence to execute strategy (i.e., create and deliver customer-sought value by performing their jobs) that facilitate accomplishing organizational performance. As discussed, these measures, in turn, are impacted by competence in the leadership, interpersonal, and intra-personal domains. These include leadership capability, culture, innovation, agility, resilience, employee satisfaction, employee engagement, employee performance and productivity, job satisfaction, employee relations, and staff retention, representing the strategic, activity-operational, and input-tactical measurement levels. Thus, confirming the interrelatedness of the competence domains as treated by Hogan and Warrenfeltz (2003).

4. Methodology

Limited empirical evidence on the topic compelled an exploratory approach (Forza, 2016; Garavan et al, 2021; Jansen, 2010; Levenson, 2018). The intention was to uncover an early understanding to solidly position future research instead of prematurely providing conclusive analyses and generalizations (Forza, 2016; Jansen, 2010).

4.1 Exploratory (Qualitative) Survey

Answering the research question required extensive amounts of standardized data collected through a survey. Survey research is a systematic method for collecting large amounts of standardized data, at a low cost, in a short period, from a diverse sample of respondents, with an instrument, such as a questionnaire, consisting of closed-ended and/or open-ended questions by conducting either interviews or administering a questionnaire (Forza, 2016; Jansen, 2010; O'Leary, 2021). A questionnaire provides control over the data collection process as all respondents are asked the same questions and offered the same response formats. Surveys are classified as exploratory (qualitative), descriptive, or explanatory (Forza, 2016; Jansen, 2010).

Limitations of survey research include low response rates due to survey fatigue, the explosion of junk emails, perceptions of bias, and the lack of probing opportunities (Forza, 2016; O'Leary, 2021). Strengths of surveys offset the limitations and include (a) reaching many potential respondents, with a range of views, and over a large geographical area, (b) allowing for comparisons, (c) generating standardized, quantifiable numeric data, (d) generating textual data through open-ended questions, and (e) confidential and anonymous responses (Forza, 2016; O'Leary, 2021).

4.2 Data Collection Instrument

We developed our instrument (questionnaire) after a rigorous literature review (Forza, 2016; O'Leary, 2021). We enhanced trustworthiness by attending to construct identification and linking questions to the study objectives. We adhered to basic design rules, namely, (a) selecting the appropriate data collection method, (b) attention to flow, layout, and wording of questions, and (c) the face-to-face pre-test of the questionnaire with experts (human resource professionals) prior to the main study (Forza, 2016; O'Leary, 2021). The feedback from these experts included collecting data using an online self-report questionnaire. We adjusted the questionnaire based on the pre-test feedback.

The questionnaire consisted of two sections collecting (a) demographics and (b) respondents' perceptions about using employee competence measurement, including L&D, to execute strategy to accomplish organizational performance. The questionnaire comprised 16 questions; 14 were closed-ended and two were open-ended (cf. Jansen, 2010). Examples of questions include: "I am currently employed by a firm active in the following sector

…" as part of demographics; "My organization uses the undermentioned metrics (containing a brief description of the metrics) to manage organizational performance"; "In your view, explain how …" as part of statements relating to perceptions of using employee competence measurement in strategy execution to accomplish organizational performance. The survey was conducted according to ethical research principles. The relevant institutions granted ethical clearance. Voluntary participation was based on informed consent, anonymity, and confidentiality, and participants could withdraw at any time without penalty. No compensation was offered for participation.

4.3 Sample

Sampling in exploratory/qualitative studies poses a challenge as rules and assumptions of explanatory research do not apply (Staller, 2021). The absence of clear and coherent guidance on sample size in qualitative research compounds this challenge (Forza, 2016; Jansen, 2010; Staller, 2021). Misunderstandings persist even when scholars have empirically determined guidelines for specific research methodologies, due to variation (Staller, 2021).

Scholars agree that exploratory studies, including exploratory surveys, rely on a *few responses* to aid interpretive understanding, which is more meaningful than generalizations (Forza, 2016; Jansen, 2010; Staller, 2021). Some scholars warn that large samples can defeat the purpose of understanding (Staller, 2021). Contrary to quantitative studies, the few responses cannot be accurately calculated in advance (Staller, 2021). Furthermore, the focus is not on the number *per se* but the kind of observation unit that best meets the research purpose or answers the research question (Staller, 2021). A suggested numerical guideline ranged from 1 to 50 (cf. Staller, 2021).

To benefit from exploratory research, scholars recommend that the few responses be diverse and cover all relevant varieties of the reality under investigation (Forza, 2016; Jansen, 2010; Staller, 2021). Some scholars suggest that a sample is adequate or saturated when conclusions converge after analysis (Jansen, 2010; Staller, 2021). However, given various interpretations, saturation is not a panacea for an adequate sample size (Staller, 2021). Guidelines to consider in exploratory surveys include (a) to be ethical, use the smallest sample necessary, which is sufficient to satisfy the study objectives, (b) to yield valuable scientific and practical results, and (c) not violate the assumptions of statistical analyses (Forza, 2016; Hannah, 2024; Staller, 2021).

4.4 Data Collection Site

Exploratory surveys use purposive sampling (Forza, 2016; Jansen, 2010; Staller, 2021). We selected the South African Board for People Practices (SABPP) as our data collection site because of its wide-ranging membership, including varied economic activities, organization sizes, and (potential) use of advanced practices, such as employee competence measurement to execute strategy to accomplish organizational performance. Thus, SABPP would be the best source of information to answer the research question (Forza, 2016; Jansen, 2010; O'Leary, 2021).

We provided a cross-sectional survey link to the SABPP in June 2018, which they shared with their members, inviting their voluntary, anonymous, and confidential participation based on informed consent. The survey closed in September 2018. Anonymized feedback was provided to the SABPP and interested respondents in January 2021.

5. Findings and Discussion

As part of a larger study, this paper reports on organizations' investments in employee competence development by aligning L&D and effective strategy execution to accomplish organizational performance. Sixty-one respondents participated in our exploratory survey. Fifty-one respondents reported using L&D in strategy execution to manage organizational performance. Only 27 (of the 51) respondents completed the demographic variable section, making it useful. These (27) responses met the numerical suggestion for exploratory/ qualitative surveys (1-50) and trustworthy criteria discussed by scholars (Forza, 2016; Staller, 2021).

The respondents were diverse in terms of:

- industry (finance and business services; construction; transportation, storage, and communication; electricity, gas, and water; mining and quarrying; wholesale trade, commercial agents, and allied services),
- organizational employee size (large >201, medium 51-200, and small 21- 50 (cf. South Africa, 2003)),
- perception of organizational performance (ranging from excellent to average),

- profile of respondent (CEO to frontline staff; holding a post-graduate degree to certificate; and experience – mode was 10 years),
- strategy employed (various lifecycle, e.g., growth, maintenance, divest, and competitive, e.g., low cost, differentiation, focus),
- satisfaction with strategy employed (ranging from very successful to very unsuccessful),
- reasons for satisfaction with strategy employed (ranging from appropriate to inappropriate to achieve organizational goals; and organizational goals are inappropriate),
- competence measures used and frequency of measurement (ranged from annually to monthly).

The diverse responses comply with qualitative research guidance (Forza, 2016; Jansen, 2010; Staller, 2021).

Most respondents (22/27) indicated ineffective L&D investments in employee competence development to execute strategy to manage organizational performance, as their organizational performance could be improved. This response is consistent with the literature (Garavan et al, 2020; Garavan et al, 2021; Holm, Kringelum and Anand, 2025). An open-ended question aimed at advancing understanding required respondents to specify how the competence measures they used, including L&D, in managing organizational performance through strategy execution, supported competitive advantage (the foundation of a sound strategy facilitating its implementation to accomplish organizational performance). Respondents struggled to answer this question, as inferred from their responses or lack thereof. Eight of the 27 respondents did not answer this question. Eleven respondents provided ambiguous answers such as “win-win” (#10), “strategic input” (#34), “business alignment” (#37), and “give a clear indication of actual vs. planned” (#39).

Eight responses were conceivably partially compatible with the literature on competitive advantage (Barney, 1991; Chandler, 1962; Porter, 1985; Thompson et al, 2024). Two of the eight respondents (#5, 25) from regulated industries stated that competitive advantage is not applicable because they are not subject to competition, which is reasonable. The remaining six respondents (two General Managers, two Divisional Heads, two Specialists) reported performance that could be improved:

- excellent – achieving their goals 80-100% of the time (#21),
- good – achieving their goals 60-79% of the time (#48, #55), and
- average – achieving their goals 40-59% of the time (#23, #44, #26).

Despite reporting excellent performance, Respondent #21 indicated the strategies (growth, differentiation, focus) were inappropriate to accomplish organizational goals – a contradiction. Respondents’ (verbatim) answers to the open-ended question vaguely referred to some dimension of competitive advantage as discussed. Respondents #21, #48, and #55 vaguely referred to talent but not specifically to their competence to execute strategy. Respondent #21 replied: “Map *Key talent* in market in advance, shorten replacement period, fast track performance.” Respondent #48 replied: “Ensure top talent retention.” Respondent #55 replied: “Helps us stay above the market in terms of *retaining people*, using the best available technology, work practices, etc.” Respondent #23 vaguely referred to innovation in its reply: “Always ensuring the company encourages innovation and efficiency in all we do. don't [sic] do the same task the same way and expect different results.” Respondent #44 vaguely referred to customers but not customer-sought value in its reply: “The monthly *customer feedback* assists with benchmarking how we fair with our competitors.” Respondent #26 vaguely referred to innovation and talent in its reply: “creating the environment for innovation is always the challenge. In a fast phase environment and constant pressure innovations sometimes go out the window. It is about identifying the right *talent* and having inspirational leaders that embrace diversity and out of the box thinking.”

These responses suggest respondents neglected innovative customer-sought value – the reason for an organization's existence and a dimension of competitive advantage as discussed (Drucker, 1954; O’Boyle, 2023; Thompson et al, 2024). Neglecting customer-sought value is consistent with Taylor (1911[2022]) and O’Boyle (2023), who maintain that organizations overlook customer value. If organizations do not know what their customers value, how can the requisite employee competence be available to offer customer-sought value, i.e., job performance constituting strategy execution, accomplishing organizational performance? As expected, L&D investments will be ineffective and a waste of resources.

The open-ended responses to competitive advantage did not link competence measures used and crafting a competitive advantage unambiguously as explained in the literature, namely, (a) outperforming rivals in chosen markets by (b) offering differentially better customer-sought value by (c) suitably competent employees through (d) aligning key actions (strategy execution) with strategic intent (strategy formulation) (Barney, 1991; Porter, 1985; Skivington and Daft, 1991; Thompson et al, 2024). Competitive advantage pertains to business-specific

(unique) competence that sets the organization apart from rivals (as shown in Figure 1) and is supported by leadership and interpersonal competence and underpinned by intra-personal competence (Hogan and Warrenfeltz, 2003). Hence, there seems to be a disconnect between the competence measures used by respondents and the attainment of a competitive advantage that facilitates effective strategy execution to accomplish organizational performance – a phantasmagoria.

6. Open-ended Responses vs. Closed-ended Responses Measuring Competence to Craft a Competitive Advantage

To gain further insight, we cross-checked the open-ended responses of the six respondents (#21, #48, #55, #23, #44, and #26) with their answers to closed-ended questions measuring competence required to craft a competitive advantage, illustrated in Figure 1, and discussed. Table 1 summarizes these responses.

Table 1: Reported measures used to assess competence to craft a competitive advantage

Reported competence measures used to craft a competitive advantage anchoring strategy to facilitate accomplishing organizational performance	Respondent #					
	21	48	55	23	44	26
Outcome measures:						
Customer satisfaction	•	•	•	•	•	
Culture	•		•	•	•	
Employee satisfaction	•	•		•	•	
Output measures:						
Leadership capability and succession	•	•	•	•		•
Employee engagement	•			•	•	
Employee performance and productivity	•	•	•	•		•
Activity measures:						
Job satisfaction	•			•	•	
Absenteeism	•	•	•	•		
Employee relations	•	•	•	•	•	•
Performance management	•	•	•	•	•	•
Workforce planning	•	•	•	•		•
Staff retention	•		•	•		•
Staff turnover	•	•	•	•	•	•
Input measures:						
Compensation	•		•	•	•	

Source: Survey responses

Table 1 shows that respondents reportedly used a range of measures at the strategic (outcome, output), activity (processes-operational), and input (tactical) levels of measurement, pertinent to crafting a competitive advantage. Nonetheless, respondents could not make the connection between the competence measures used and competitive advantage, as discussed in the literature and presented in the previous section. Consistent with the discussed literature, these measures were: (a) ineffective in developing and aligning employee competence with competitive advantage, the hallmark of a sound strategy and facilitating its execution, to accomplish organizational performance and (b) seemingly used in a siloed, instead of an integrated fashion, resulting in the reported performance shortfalls (Barney, 1991; Porter, 1985; Levenson, 2018; Nienaber and McNeill, 2022). This disjunction is reflected in their responses to the open-ended question addressed in the previous section.

7. Afterthoughts, Conclusions, Contribution, Limitations, and Suggestions for Further Studies

Despite significant L&D spending to enhance employee competence to accomplish organizational performance, strategy execution fails – realized performance falls short of planning. The recurring reason for the performance shortfall is the unavailability of suitably competent employees to execute strategy. This phantasmagoria raised

the question: "How do organizations align L&D with effective strategy execution to manage organizational performance?"

Given the limited literature on this topic, we investigated this problem through an exploratory/qualitative online survey. The findings of the study suggest an inept L&D and organizational strategy alignment, which returns organizational performance shortfalls. The responses to an open-ended question revealed that respondents neglected customer-sought value, the core rationale for an organization's existence, and the essence of strategy. Consequently, no amount of L&D spending would align or develop employee competence to create and deliver customer-sought value. The study concluded that respondents' L&D in its current format is, indeed, a phantasmagoria – it was ineffective in aligning and building employee competence with effective strategy execution, accomplishing organizational performance. Given the respondents' responses to the survey, this ineffectiveness is interpreted as L&D was not approached in an integrated, systemic, and systematic way to identify performance needs to align and build employee competence with effective strategy to accomplish organizational performance. Thus, no amount of L&D spending would have improved the participants' organizational performance.

Our study contributes new knowledge by demonstrating, in detail (Figure 1), the L&D and organizational performance alignment, a link that has not been demonstrated previously. HR, under the auspices of leadership, can fulfil its role as strategic business partner using L&D to fortify organizational performance per the Figure 1 conceptual framework by practically assisting leadership (a) to build and align required employee competence to execute strategy (b) by using an integrated measurement system comprising a few relevant measures at the different measurement levels, (c) to attain a competitive advantage (d) based on customer-sought value, (e) in the markets served, (f) differentially better than their competitors (g) to accomplish planned organizational performance. In essence, ensuring the alignment of key actions and strategic intent, through the mechanism 'structural dimensions of organization.' In doing so, leadership unifies strategy formulation and execution, thereby fortifying organizational performance. This requires a systemic and systematic integration of a few comprehensive measures (potentially already in use within the organization) across different measurement levels, and collaboratively performed by various organizational stakeholders, illustrated in Figure 1.

The cross-sectional nature of the study and the single geographical location limit generalization. Hence, we invite replication studies. We also recommend further descriptive and explanatory studies, including longitudinal and multi-method studies, across various geographical contexts, to permit broader generalizations.

Ethics and AI Declaration: Ethical clearance was obtained for the study (2017_CRERC_001(FA)). We did not use AI tools in writing the paper.

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