

## THE LEARNING ORGANIZATIONS IN PUBLIC SECTOR IN ROMANIA

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**Abstract.** *The Learning Organization is the organization that continuously learns and readapts. It is the place where employees constantly develop the capacity of generating the results they truly target, where new and bold thinking methods are encouraged, where collective aspirations are released and where people continuously discover how to learn together (Senge, 1990). This concept emerged in the corporations of the 1980s, but in the meantime it also became attractive for the public sector. This paper analyses the extent to which the concept of 'Learning Organization' exists in the public sector in Romania, the current learning capacity of the organizations in this sector and the impact of the concept at organizational level. As research instrument, the questionnaire designed by Bruce Britton (1998) 'The Learning NGO' was applied within six public organizations. The research questions addressed in this paper are: (1) What is the degree of use of the learning concept to support and facilitate the development of employees, organization itself, institutions and local community?; (2) What is the impact of the learning concept on the public organizations?*

**Keywords:** *learning organization; public sector; local public organizations; central public organization; Romania.*

### Introduction

Public organizations in Romania have the desire to continuously improve and adapt to various internal and external challenges. Unfortunately, not all of them succeed. There is a low rate of services delivery and organizational improvement, especially in the public sector. A continuous improvement process is highly linked to a commitment to learning, but it seems that not all managers understood this reality. Problem solving, placing a public good or service, but also changing or innovating a process in public sector, need to be addressed immediately by a new approach.

In the absence of learning, the organizations – and the employees – simply repeat the old practices. Related to private organizations, the concept "learning organizations" has been mentioned for the first time in the late '80s. Managers from private sector have

recognized the link between learning and continuous improvement and have begun to refocus their companies around it. Scholars have jumped too on the bandwagon, beating the drum for “learning organizations” and “knowledge-creating companies” (Garvin, 1993, p. 78). The concept “learning organization” has spread towards the other sectors.

## **Theoretical background**

### ***Learning organization. Definitions, characteristics and functions***

#### ***Definition of learning organization***

Chetley and Vincent (2003) defined the development of a learning organization as an ongoing, systematic process requiring trust and a recognition of the subtlety and complexity of human relations and describe three stages in this process; firstly, individuals and teams are encouraged and supported to learn; secondly, these processes are socialized or institutionalized; and thirdly, learning is at the heart of an organization, meaning that learning is used to transform and develop the organization (Al-Nsour & Al-Weshah, 2011, p.14).

There are many definitions of the learning organization (see Table 1).

***Table 1. Learning organizations definitions (The authors based on literature)***

<b>Authors</b>	<b>Definitions of learning organization</b>
Senge, 1990	Learning organizations are places where people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people are continually learning how to learn together.
Pedler et al., 1991	A learning organization is an organization that facilitates the learning of all of its members and continuously transforms itself in order to meet its strategic goals.
Garvin, 1993	A learning organization is an organization skilled at creating, acquiring, and transferring knowledge, and at modifying its behavior to reflect new knowledge and insights.
Marquardt, 1996	Learning organizations are companies that are continually transforming themselves to better manage knowledge, utilize technology, empower people, and expand learning to better adapt and succeed in the changing environment.
Marsick & Watkin, 1999	An organization that emphasizes three keys: system-level, continuous learning; created in order to create and manage knowledge outcomes; which lead to improvement in the organization's performance, and ultimately its value
Griego et al., 2000	An organization that constantly improves results based on increased performance made possible because it is growing more adroit.
Templeton et al., 2002	An organization in which employees are continually acquiring and sharing new knowledge and are willing to apply that knowledge in making decisions or performing their work
Armstrong & Foley, 2003	A learning organization has cultural facets (visions, values, assumptions and behaviors) that support a learning environment; processes that foster people's learning and development by identifying their learning needs and facilitating learning; and structural facets that enable learning activities to be supported and implemented in the workplace.

Table 1 illustrates the fact that there is no unique comprehensive definition of learning organization.

A learning organization may be described as an environment where organizational learning is structured so that teamwork, collaboration, creativity, and knowledge processes have a collective meaning and are valued (Confessore, 1997, p.5). It is important to mention that learning organizations are more than simply 'containers' for individuals who are learning, one indicator of a learning organization is that everyone, irrespective of their position, makes a valued contribution to the organization's learning (Britton, 1998, p.4). The concept of organizational learning itself requires an understanding of three important terms (Britton, 1998, p. 4):

- Information - is the simple fragmented raw material of facts, opinions and ideas of which knowledge is made;
- Knowledge - systematically organized information which, by the processes of analysis, comparison, testing and generalizing can be used to answer complex questions;
- Wisdom - this involves uniting the facts and insights of knowledge with the fruits of experience in a way which can usefully guide action.

### ***Characteristics of learning organization***

The literature has shown various characteristics of learning organization, but the authors of this paper consider that Pedler et al. (1991) have presented more comprehensive characteristics (Britton, 1998, p.2):

- A learning approach to strategy (encouraging flexibility by including strategic learning feedback loops);
- Participative policy making;
- Informing (using information technology to inform and empower people);
- Formative accounting and control (structuring financial systems to assist learning);
- Internal exchange (ensuring constructive, supportive relationships within the organization);
- Reward flexibility (using creativity in how people are rewarded for good performance);
- Enabling structures (avoiding multi-level hierarchies and encouraging flattened, collegiate-style structures);
- Boundary workers as environmental scanners (acknowledging the value of those who deal with the 'outside world' as sources of crucial information which can inform decision-making);
- Inter-organizational learning (identifying opportunities for networking, strategic partnerships, benchmarking and joint learning activities);
- Learning climate (facilitating experimentation and allowing mistakes providing they are used as learning opportunities);
- Self-development for all (resources and encouragement for self-development are made available for all members of the organization).

The nature of a learning organization becomes easily perceptible when compared with a traditional one. The differences between these two are presented in Table 2.

**Table 2. Typical characteristics of traditional and learning organizations**  
(Skuncikiene, Balvociute & Balciunas, 2009, p.65)

Characteristics	Traditional organization	Learning organization
General values	Utility	Excellence and mastery Organizational renewal
Style of management	Control	Assistance Training
Strategy. Action plan	Top-down approach Road map	Everyone is consulted Learning plan
Structure	Hierarchy	Flat structure Dynamic networks
Characteristics of personal	People who know (experts) Knowledge is power	People who learn Mistakes are tolerated as inseparable part of learning
Exceptional skills of personnel	Applicable learning	Generative learning
Evaluation system	Financial performance measures	Financial and non-financial performance measures
Teams	Work groups in separate functional departments	Cross-functional teams

The structure of learning organizations illustrates that learning is a prominent feature at a number of different levels (Britton, 1998, p.3):

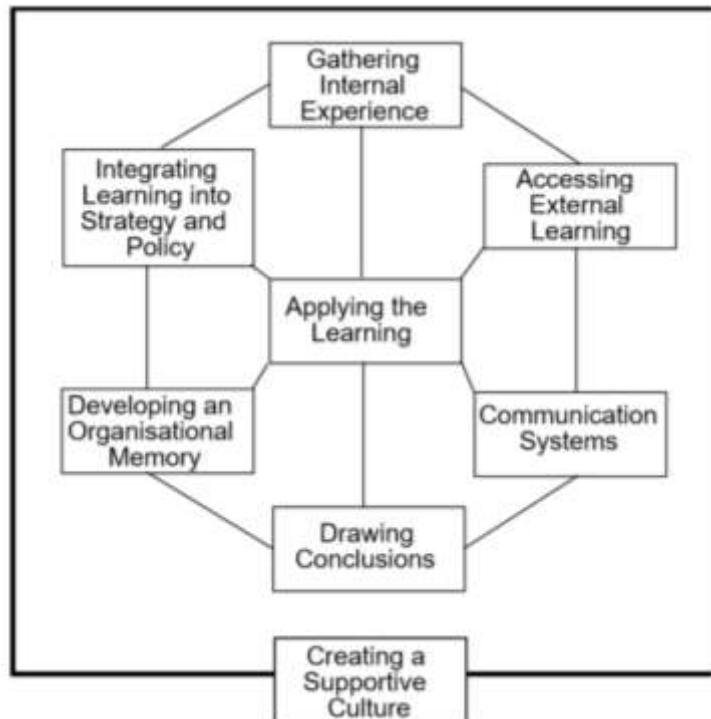
- individual learning;
- team or work group learning (sharing lessons between individuals working together);
- cross-functional learning (sharing lessons between departments and sections);
- operational organizational learning (focused on improving practice, increasing effectiveness and efficiency);
- strategic organizational learning (learning to deal with significant changes in the environment which affect the overall strategy of the organization).

### Functions of a learning organization

Efficient learning implies the application of specific key-functions, in all (public, NGOs and private) organizations. These functions are (Britton, 2002, pp.14-29; Britton, 1998, pp.12-20) (see Figure 1):

- *Creating a learning culture.* A learning culture is an organizational environment which enables, encourages, values, rewards and uses the learning of its members both individually and collectively;
- *Gathering internal experience.* The organizations have two main knowledge sources: the internal experience and the lessons learned from other organizations. The learning organization exploits the internal experience and transforms it into practical and accessible lessons, especially not to repeat mistakes and to reappraise its success;
- *Accessing external learning.* The learning process within the learning organizations is based also on the lessons learned from other organizations. The learning organization is open towards partnerships, NGOs or public and private organizations to learn from their experiences, failures and success;

- *Communication systems.* The communication systems, both formal and informal, are very important as they offer the learning support for information communication, and these have to be developed.
- *Mechanisms for drawing conclusions.* Drawing conclusions is a process which needs to be seen as the responsibility of the whole organization and should, ideally, happen as near to the source of the experience as possible;
- *Developing an organizational memory.* A learning organization needs mechanisms which enable an individual's memory to be 'down-loaded' into a knowledge management system so that everyone can continue to access that person's knowledge long after the individual may have moved on from the organization;
- *Integrating learning into strategy and policy.* One way of building lessons learned into the fabric of an organization is to develop strategies and policies which embody the lessons it has learned. This provides the organization with a framework for decision-making and resource allocation which is grounded in the organization's own experience and what it has learned from other organizations;
- *Applying the learning.* The ultimate test of learning is the ability to apply what has been learned. Only when learning is applied in the work setting can we say that a continuous learning cycle has been created.



**Figure 1. The eight key functions of a learning organization**  
(Britton, 2005, p.41)

All these functions are interconnected. Creating a supportive culture embraces the other seven because without a supportive organizational culture of learning, there is unlikely to be commitment to the other functions (Britton, 2005, p.41).

## **Learning organization in the public sector**

Christiansen et al. (2007, p.4) considers that the main argument in supporting the conception that public and private organizations are fundamentally different in key aspects is the fact that public interests differ from private interests, since the public sector must consider a broader set of norms and values. Many considerations must be weighed against each other, and democratic considerations, constitutional values and public welfare are given much more weight in public organizations than in private organizations. Second, the leaders of public organizations are accountable to citizens and voters rather than to special groups. Third, public organizations require a greater emphasis on openness, transparency, equal treatment, impartiality and predictability.

The need for change comes usually from the external environment, especially in public organizations. The pressure for change is constant, and the response often triggers a more profound pressure for change. The primary objectives face the resistance of external factors, and thus new objectives are set; innovations created to solve a certain problem often lead to new problems (Blau & Scott, 1962, p.250).

The real and actual functioning conditions of public organizations determine the creation of behaviors oriented towards the organizational learning culture development, such as creativity, commitment, responsibility, openness towards changes and continuous learning. This is the condition to accomplish efficient innovative operations and to implement an efficient innovation.

The change has to come from the inside of the organization. In his theory-driven article, which scrutinizes the chaos and transformation theories in historical and complementary standpoints and analyzes their contributions social science and public management, Farazmand (2003, p.362 apud Maden, p.79) states that "organizations that learn, adjust, and adapt to external pressures causing systems breakdown and bifurcations can survive and evolve, and their evolution comes through internal learning and transformation". Therefore, public organizations should not only strive to keep up with the rapid change in environmental conditions but they should also learn something from change process and combine it with their own structure. In other words, public organizations should gradually transform themselves into learning organizations which are characterized by constant organization learning, flexibility and an adaptive stance (Maden, 2011, p.79).

## **Methodology**

*Research design.* In order to achieve the objectives of this paper and to respond to the research questions, the questionnaire elaborated by Bruce Britton (1998) in his book 'The Learning NGO' has been applied to public organizations.

*Defining the sample.* The questionnaire has been applied in six public organizations, from both central (three organizations) and local (three organizations) from Bucharest and other cities. Twelve questionnaires were applied in Ministry of Health (departmental level), eight questionnaires were applied in Ministry of National Education (departmental level), eight questionnaires were applied in Prefecture of Bucharest (departmental level), twelve questionnaires were applied in Cosoba City Hall (commune located in Giurgiu county), thirteen questionnaires were applied in Târgoviște City Hall

(county seat of Dâmbovița county) and eight questionnaires were applied in Cornu City Hall (commune located in Prahova county). The respondents completed the questionnaire anonymously.

*Data collection.* The questionnaire is composed of 40 questions with the aim to identify the "learning profile" of the six public organizations in Romania, structured in the eight key functions presented below (see Tables 4 - 9).

Table 3 presents the correspondence between the functions and the number of question.

**Table 3. The correspondence function - no. of question  
(the authors based on questionnaire)**

Function	No. of question in the questionnaire
Creating a Supportive Culture	1, 16, 17, 32, 33
Gathering Internal Experience	2, 15, 18, 31, 34
Accessing External Learning	3, 14, 19, 30, 35
Communication Systems	4, 13, 20, 29, 36
Mechanisms for drawing conclusions	5, 12, 21, 28, 37
Developing an organizational memory	6, 11, 22, 27, 38
Integrating Learning into strategy and policy	7, 10, 23, 26, 39
Applying the Learning	8, 9, 24, 25, 40

A plot organizational profile has been created through the questionnaire, which gives the 'learning profile' of the organization (see Figures 2 - 6). In regards to the eight applicable functions for learning organizations, the profile shows where the organizations strengths and weaknesses lie. Before distributing the questionnaire, the authors have verified the applicability of questions' wording within the organizations. The questionnaire has been adapted for the public sector, the size and the structure of the organization/department, without affecting the relevance for the organizational learning function. Also, the questionnaire identifies the respondent's job/position, sex and years of experience within the organization. The minimum requirement to complete the questionnaire was that the respondent must have worked for at least one year within the organization. The respondents were from both managerial and executive levels, both public servants and temporary staff.

The data collection was made online between January 20 - March 20, 2018 and all questionnaires have been validated.

## Results

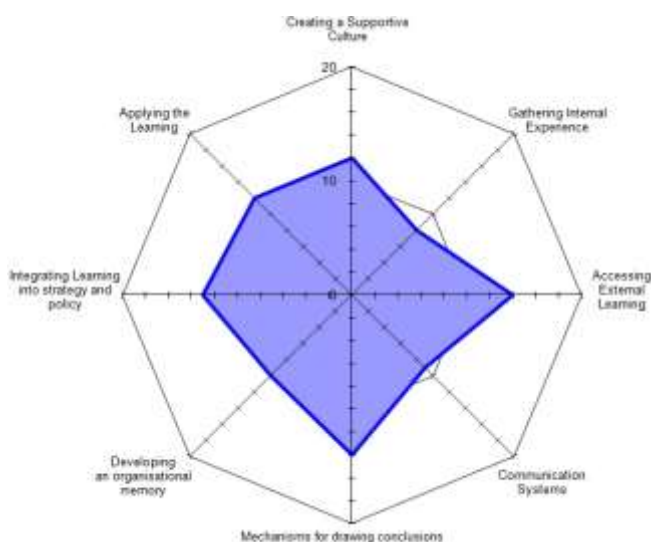
Analysis of the findings are presented below.

**Table 4. Results for the Ministry of Health (departmental level)**

Creating a Supportive Culture	Gathering Internal Experience	Accessing External Learning	Communication Systems	Mechanisms for drawing conclusions	Developing an organisational memory	Integrating Learning into strategy and policy	Applying the Learning
Question	Question	Question	Question	Question	Question	Question	Question
1 2	2 1	3 4	4 2	5 4	6 2	7 2	8 2
16 2	15 0	14 2	13 1	12 2	11 4	10 3	9 3
17 2	18 2	19 3	20 0	21 3	22 0	23 3	24 2
32 3	31 2	30 3	29 3	28 2	27 2	26 2	25 3
33 3	34 3	35 2	36 3	37 3	38 2	39 3	40 2
<b>Total</b> 12	<b>Total</b> 8	<b>Total</b> 14	<b>Total</b> 9	<b>Total</b> 14	<b>Total</b> 10	<b>Total</b> 13	<b>Total</b> 12
Av 2,4	Av 1,6	Av 2,8	Av 1,8	Av 2,8	Av 2	Av 2,6	Av 2,4
SD 0,548	SD 1,14	SD 0,837	SD 1,304	SD 0,837	SD 1,414	SD 0,548	SD 0,548

(Av = Average; SD = Standard Deviation)

<b>Average Score</b>	<b>11,5</b>
<b>Average II</b>	<b>2,3</b>

**Figure 2. Ministry of Health Learning Profile (departmental level)****Table 5. Results for Ministry of National Education (departmental level)**

Creating a Supportive Culture	Gathering Internal Experience	Accessing External Learning	Communication Systems	Mechanisms for drawing conclusions	Developing an organisational memory	Integrating Learning into strategy and policy	Applying the Learning
Question	Question	Question	Question	Question	Question	Question	Question
1 1	2 3	3 2	4 1	5 4	6 3	7 2	8 1
16 2	15 2	14 2	13 2	12 3	11 3	10 1	9 1
17 3	18 2	19 0	20 0	21 1	22 0	23 2	24 2
32 1	31 1	30 1	29 3	28 2	27 1	26 1	25 2
33 2	34 3	35 2	36 2	37 3	38 2	39 2	40 2
<b>Total</b> 9	<b>Total</b> 11	<b>Total</b> 7	<b>Total</b> 8	<b>Total</b> 13	<b>Total</b> 9	<b>Total</b> 8	<b>Total</b> 8
Av 1,8	Av 2,2	Av 1,4	Av 1,6	Av 2,6	Av 1,8	Av 1,6	Av 1,6
SD 0,837	SD 0,837	SD 0,894	SD 1,14	SD 1,14	SD 1,304	SD 0,548	SD 0,548

(Av = Average; SD = Standard Deviation)

<b>Average Score</b>	<b>9,13</b>
<b>Average II</b>	<b>1,83</b>



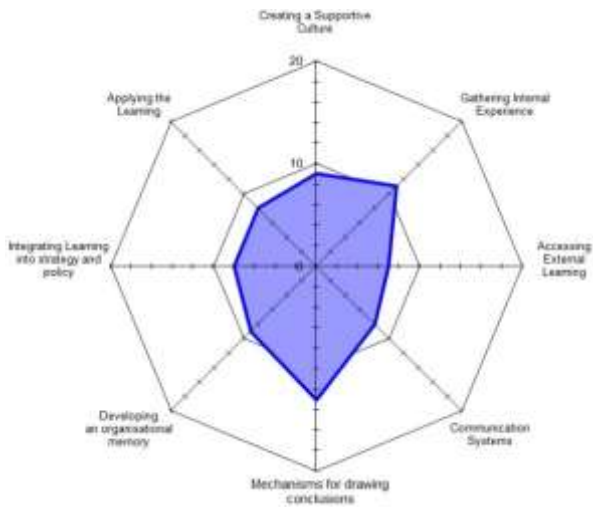


Figure 3. Ministry of National Education Learning Profile (departmental level)

Table 6. Results for Prefecture of Bucharest (departmental level)

Creating a Supportive Culture	Gathering Internal Experience	Accessing External Learning	Communication Systems	Mechanisms for drawing conclusions	Developing an organisational memory	Integrating Learning into strategy and policy	Applying the Learning
Question 1	Question 2	Question 3	Question 4	Question 5	Question 6	Question 7	Question 8
1	1	3	1	1	2	3	2
16	1	1	1	1	0	1	3
17	0	2	1	1	1	1	2
32	1	1	1	3	1	2	2
33	1	1	2	2	2	1	2
Total 4	Total 8	Total 8	Total 8	Total 7	Total 6	Total 8	Total 11
Av 0,8	Av 1,6	Av 1,6	Av 1,6	Av 1,4	Av 1,2	Av 1,6	Av 2,2
SD 0,447	SD 0,894	SD 0,894	SD 0,894	SD 0,548	SD 0,837	SD 0,894	SD 0,447

(Av = Average; SD = Standard Deviation)

Average Score	7,5
Average II	1,5

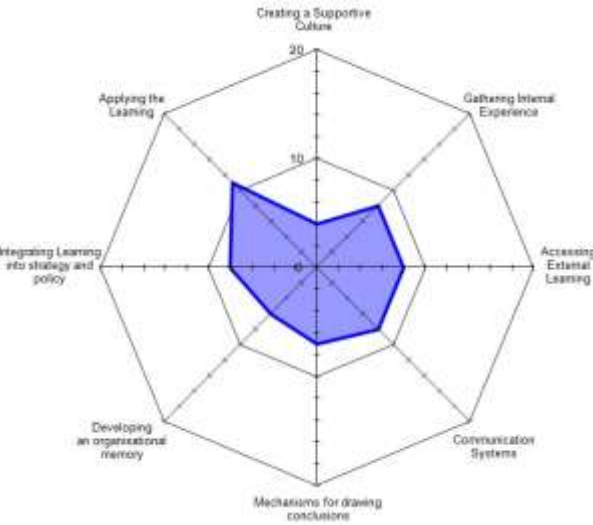


Figure 4. Prefecture of Bucharest Learning Profile (departmental level)

Table 7. Results for Cosoba City Hall

Creating a Supportive Culture	Gathering Internal Experience	Accessing External Learning	Communication Systems	Mechanisms for drawing conclusions	Developing an organisational memory	Integrating Learning into strategy and policy	Applying the Learning
Question	Question	Question	Question	Question	Question	Question	Question
1 3	2 1	3 3	4 3	5 4	6 4	7 3	8 3
16 3	15 2	14 3	13 3	12 3	11 3	10 3	9 3
17 3	18 3	19 3	20 3	21 3	22 3	23 3	24 3
32 1	31 3	30 3	29 3	28 2	27 2	26 3	25 3
33 1	34 3	35 3	36 3	37 3	38 3	39 3	40 3
Total 11	Total 12	Total 15	Total 15	Total 15	Total 15	Total 15	Total 15
Av 2,2	Av 2,4	Av 3	Av 3	Av 3	Av 3	Av 3	Av 3
SD 1,095	SD 0,894	SD 0	SD 0	SD 0,707	SD 0,707	SD 0	SD 0

(Av = Average; SD = Standard Deviation)

Average Score	14,1
Average II	2,83



Figure 5. Cosoba City Hall Learning Profile

Table 8. Results for Târgoviște City Hall

Creating a Supportive Culture		Gathering Internal Experience		Accessing External Learning		Communication Systems		Mechanisms for drawing conclusions		Developing an organisational memory		Integrating Learning into strategy and policy		Applying the Learning			
Question		Question		Question		Question		Question		Question		Question		Question			
1	3	2	4	3	3	4	4	5	3	6	3	7	4	8	4		
16	3	15	4	14	3	13	3	12	3	11	4	10	3	9	4		
17	4	18	3	19	4	20	3	21	3	22	4	23	4	24	4		
32	4	31	4	30	3	29	4	28	3	27	3	26	4	25	4		
33	4	34	3	35	4	36	4	37	4	38	4	39	4	40	4		
Total		18	Total	18	Total	17	Total	18	Total	16	Total	18	Total	19	Total	20	
Av		3,6	Av		3,6	Av		3,6	Av		3,2	Av		3,6	Av		4
SD		0,548	SD		0,548	SD		0,548	SD		0,447	SD		0,548	SD		0

(Av = Average; SD = Standard Deviation)

Average Score		18
Average II		3,6

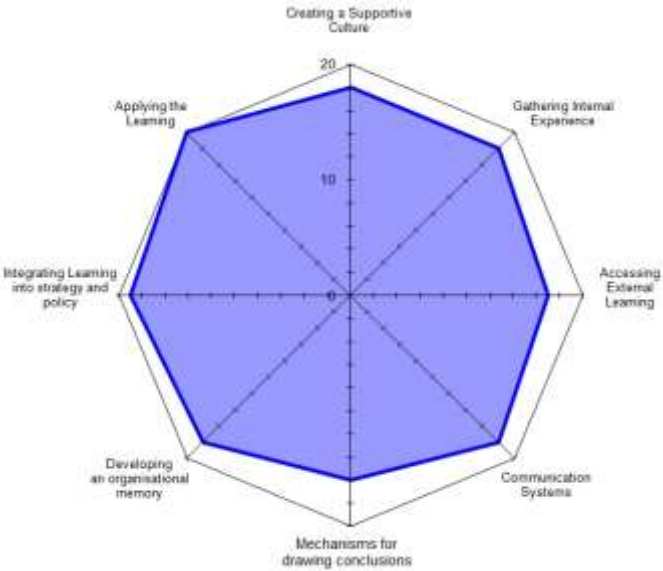


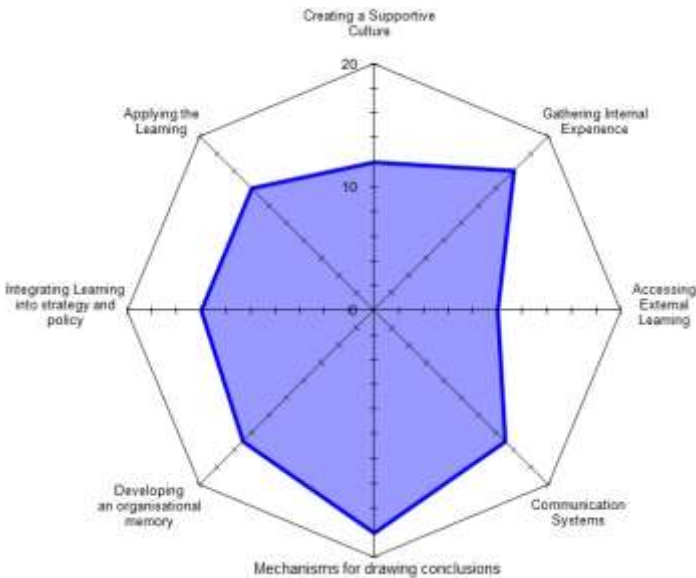
Figure 5. Târgoviște City Hall Learning Profile

**Table 9. Results for Cornu City Hall**

Creating a Supportive Culture	Gathering Internal Experience	Accessing External Learning	Communication Systems	Mechanisms for drawing conclusions	Developing an organisational memory	Integrating Learning into strategy and policy	Applying the Learning
Question	Question	Question	Question	Question	Question	Question	Question
1 3	2 3	3 3	4 4	5 4	6 3	7 2	8 4
16 2	15 4	14 2	13 2	12 3	11 2	10 4	9 3
17 2	18 3	19 1	20 2	21 4	22 2	23 3	24 2
32 3	31 3	30 1	29 4	28 4	27 4	26 2	25 3
33 2	34 3	35 3	36 3	37 3	38 4	39 3	40 2
<b>Total</b> 12	<b>Total</b> 16	<b>Total</b> 10	<b>Total</b> 15	<b>Total</b> 18	<b>Total</b> 15	<b>Total</b> 14	<b>Total</b> 14
Av 2,4	Av 3,2	Av 2	Av 3	Av 3,6	Av 3	Av 2,8	Av 2,8
SD 0,548	SD 0,447	SD 1	SD 1	SD 0,548	SD 1	SD 0,837	SD 0,837

(Av = Average; SD = Standard Deviation)

<b>Average Score</b>	<b>14,3</b>
<b>Average II</b>	<b>2,85</b>



**Figure 6. Cornu City Hall Learning Profile**

The results illustrate the fact that the central public administration organizations cannot be considered learning organizations, compared to the local public administration organizations, where some functions can be identified (for example Târgoviște City Hall).

The awareness to apply the “learning organization” concept within the public sector is linked to the implementation of changes, innovations and reforms with the final aim to satisfy the needs of citizens.

The managers and employees of public organizations have to engage into the efforts of implementing the elements of learning organizations. On the contrary, the organization can find itself in the situation to no longer deliver the public service in accordance with the citizens’ needs, without the possibility to reinvent or to adapt to the current challenges. Also, they have to constantly develop new knowledge management abilities through a continuous learning process, to develop a learning culture, to manage the changes with a positive attitude and to have a clear vision of what it has to be achieved.

It is important that the employees agree with the managers on the learning organization strategy. In this manner, public sector organization could become learning organizations.

There are external and internal barriers in the transformation of public organizations into learning organizations as well:

- External barriers: low budget that sometimes does not allow business continuity, changing legislation quite often does not allow institutional development, involving politics in the organization's activities may lead to inconsistency of organizational objectives (especially the fact that political representatives are changed very often).
- Internal barriers: political management, bureaucracy (focusing on the system and respecting procedures), powerful hierarchical structures, authoritarian management, strict hierarchical control, monopoly in delivering the services and goods, reticence to train the employees, the personnel's resistance to change due to insecurity and fear of taking risks, lack of communication with managers, underdeveloped communication systems, all these obstruct the public organizations to become learning organizations.

## Conclusions

The research has revealed good practices examples of learning organizations in public sector. Generally, one can observe a low degree of using the concept for supporting and facilitating the development of employees, organizational process, institutions and local communities.

The impact of learning concept on the public organizations, if these would change into learning organizations, could mean: increased adaptability – the organization could face more easily the challenges and unpredictability; increased efficiency and efficacy – the organization could make better use of its resources; increased personnel motivation – the employees could feel more valued and more influent; capacity to keep highly trained employees and their knowledge – better systems to reward the employees' contribution to the organizational development; increased capacity to initiate change – learning offers confidence and the necessary information to initiate projects and to take risks.

Learning organizations accomplish their mission through activities such as: systematic problem solving, practicing, learning from own experience, learning from the experience and good practices of other organizations, but also through accelerated information transfer within the organization.

Various public organizations from Romania develop these activities more or less, but not all of them succeed in changing into learning organization. This is mostly based on some rare situations and examples, not on the systems and processes to support these activities and to integrate them into a daily operational structure.

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