

The Evolution of EFMD's Excellence in Practice Awards: A 15-year Journey of Supporting Impactful Growth

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Papers on Positive and Societal Impact from an EFMD Perspective

The Timeline

2007 marked the beginning of the Excellence in Practice journey, which at the beginning had a single winner determined during a workshop held at EFMD's Annual Conference. In 2009, on the occasion of the Brussels Annual Conference, the competition evolved and the jury composition became more elaborate, with sub-juries for each of the four clusters of cases covered. These sub-juries included a diversity of representatives: a provider representative, a corporate representative, a publication representative, and an EFMD representative. The selection of finalists during this year was based on a grid of criteria, making the competition more structured and competitive. The most significant shift occurred in 2010 when the competition adopted its current format, featuring multiple categories and multiple winners. This change allowed for the recognition of a broader range of participants within the competition.

As of 2011, the competition became linked to EFMD's Executive Education Conference with case presentations taking place a day before the conference. This further enhanced the visibility and importance of the competition within the sector. Finally, in 2012, the competition was fully integrated into the conference structure, solidifying its exposure at a significant event.

In summary, the competition's timeline showcases its evolution from a single-winner format to a more elaborate and structured competition with multiple categories and strong ties to the Executive Education Conference.

SIGNIFICANT CONTRIBUTION TO KNOWLEDGE CREATION IN THE SECTOR

The EFMD Excellence in Practice Awards has established a valuable library of best practices since its inception in 2007 (Global Focus, 2010-2022). Over the years, a total of 526 cases have been received, showcasing a wealth of knowledge and expertise in the field of executive development.

The competition's contributions are marked not only by the quantity but also by the diversity of submissions. The cases come from a wide variety of sources, reflecting both global reach (Western Europe, Russia, the Middle East, Africa, India, South-East Asia, China, Australia, South and Central America, the United States, and Canada) and client diversity, encompassing companies, governmental organisations, social profit organisations, and networks. The range of suppliers is equally diverse, with submissions coming from in-house Learning and Development departments, business schools, and alternative providers, contributing to the growing diversity of the partnerships. Many of these projects demonstrated remarkable ambition, with a significant focus on ethical, community, and corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives.

This diversity enriched the jury's debates and offered a privileged view of trends in Learning and Development practices. A jury overseeing the competition evolved over the years, reflecting a commitment to professionalising the approach. Notably, practitioners with expertise in the field have become an integral part of the jury composition. This inclusion ensures that the evaluation process benefits from real-world insights and practical knowledge. Furthermore, the competition has been providing feedback to winners since 2009, offering valuable insights for continuous improvement. Starting from 2011, this feedback has been extended to all authors. In summary, the competition's jury

has embraced professionalism by including practitioners and has established a feedback mechanism that promotes ongoing growth and excellence among both winners and submitting partnerships.

The impact of this competition extends beyond the entries themselves. The winning cases, dating from 2015 to 2023, have been available on the EFMD website, with a total of 122 documents accessible online. Additionally, articles in EFMD's Global Focus have been featuring the competition's content since 2008, with a dedicated annual Global Focus supplement featuring edited articles since 2010. As of 2023, 87 articles from this supplement are still available online. Thanks to applicants formalising their experiences and their willingness to share and discuss them on the EFMD website, the Global Focus Supplement, and the Executive Development Conference, an intense exchange amongst practitioners has been made possible.



BRINGING AN INVESTMENT PERSPECTIVE TO LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT

The 2008 financial crisis had a profound impact on corporations, leading to significant restructuring efforts. One consequence of this crisis was the limitation or even halting of Learning and Development initiatives. This shift led to the requirement for a sound learning business case for each Learning and Development project, emphasising alignment with strategic priorities and ensuring impact. EFMD's Excellence in Practice Award aimed to spotlight these practices and their role in creating impactful Learning and Development interventions, supporting the credibility and professionalism of the wider development ecosystem.

The Excellence in Practice cases also highlighted the integrator role of in-house Learning and Development departments, emphasising their alignment with multiple internal stakeholders and the deployment of various development approaches. The recognised projects and interventions excelled in the dual challenge of partnering with the business to address key challenges and collaborating with an ecosystem of suppliers to provide solutions that met expectations.

By 2013, companies had been facing a challenging economic climate for over five years, which increased the risk of reactive rather than proactive measures. This environment limited options for long-term interventions focused on developing organisational capabilities and culture. HR development faced scrutiny and efficiency targets, often prioritising the support of existing services with reduced resources over proactive analysis and issue framing. However, the cases in the Excellence in Practice Award competition showcased creativity and adaptability in coping with these pressures and trends, including new formats of risk sharing, mutual commitment, and inventive partnership constructions.

In summary, the 2008 financial crisis prompted a re-evaluation of Learning and Development investments, ultimately highlighting the value and impact that well-structured Learning and Development initiatives could bring. These years marked a period of transformation and adaptation for Learning and Development organisations, where they evolved to become essential contributors to business success and demonstrated their ability to thrive in challenging economic climates. It shifted the perception of Learning and Development from being a cost to being an impactful creator of value.



AIMING FOR IMPACT

The Excellence in Practice (EiP) framework prioritises impact as a critical factor for award selection. This is determined by assessing quantitative and qualitative indicators of impact used by the corporate Learning and Development organisation. The actual changes caused by the Learning and Development initiative are considered, as well as the ultimate impact on the company's business, finances, customers or its products and/or services. The perceived impact by owners and stakeholders is also taken into account.

In the past, investing in incumbent executives might have been viewed as a matter of conviction or belief, but Learning and Development projects now explicitly mention the organisational agenda. Objectives frequently centre around leadership, talent, or professional development, serving as catalysts for organisational change that extends beyond the individual participant's dimension. Award winners serve as prime examples as they establish development activities aimed at clarifying priorities and boosting organisational growth.

On a personal level, developments may lean towards predefined competencies and profiles, but a growing trend is to embrace an open growth ambition. This approach seeks to tap into each leader's innate potential, reflecting a broader and more flexible perspective on leadership development. An increasing number of projects concentrate on cultural change, with the goal of creating a conducive context that fosters innovation and entrepreneurship. Notably, some cases incorporate societal impact as an integral part of their project purpose and measurement, whether by nature of the project itself or intentionally added to enrich the learning experience.



DEFINING THE CHALLENGE

In order for the Learning and Development initiative to be considered a valuable investment, it is crucial for the project business case to outline the challenge that the client organisation intends to tackle. The effectiveness of the intervention will ultimately depend on how much impact it has on this challenge. To ensure that there is no confusion, the business case should address the following questions: How was the challenge initially identified? Who was responsible for addressing it? What was the connection between this business challenge and the corporate strategy? How was this integrated into HR and business processes? Finally, what was the desired outcome of the Learning and Development initiative as formulated from the outset?

Personal growth agenda

The Excellence in Practice Awards showcase cases that prioritise personal growth, values, and behaviours among managers and leaders. In today's ever-changing and unpredictable world, it is not enough to rely on rigid models or academic theories from textbooks. Instead, it is crucial for managers and leaders to strengthen their personalities, sense of responsibility, and personal capabilities - particularly in the human and emotional aspects. This will enable them to address challenges and scenarios that defy standard templates and grids.

The award-winning cases take a dual perspective, and consider both organisational and participant viewpoints. They aim to achieve cross-functional and cultural impact, reflecting the aspiration to foster an environment of growth and development. This systems approach recognises the interconnectedness of various factors and highlights the need for holistic solutions to navigate the complexities of today's business environment.

Organisational and business transformation

The focus on Learning and Development as an investment has undergone a significant shift. It now explicitly references both business and organisational aims when developing cohorts of individuals. This shift has led to multi-level, systemic indications of impact, spanning individual, process, organisational, company portfolio, and business levels.

In many cases, orchestrated programmes were designed to target different populations, often interconnected or building on each other. This holistic approach demonstrated a genuine determination among the award winners to drive transformation in both the organisation and the business while nurturing professionals and executives.

MEASUREMENT: LINKING THE IMPACT TO THE CHALLENGE

Over the past 15 years, organisations have become more skilled at measuring their impact. However, there is still room for improvement in this area.

When it comes to measuring the impact of Learning and Development, several effective practices are being shared within the industry. Organisations are increasingly focused on quantifying the influence of Learning and Development on various aspects, such as the self-renewal of a company, the restored confidence of a management group, the successful repositioning of a business portfolio, and the level of integration of successive acquisitions. These measurements include engagement surveys of both employees and external stakeholders, innovation readiness assessments, benchmark assessments of an organisation, behavioural assessments of individuals, impact surveys, career progression indicators, and project outcomes. One innovative case introduced the concept of Social Return on Investment, emphasising the broad-reaching effects of impactful Learning and Development initiatives.

While some cases present compelling quantitative measures of impact, many rely on qualitative measures, often self-reported by participants, with the Net Promoter Score being a persistent trend. Qualitative measures have a less solid claim in evaluating impact compared to those that can link quantitative indicators to the organisational and business claims initially made. Furthermore, the sources of measurement vary, enhancing the strength and validity of the indicators used. Some cases include participants' direct hierarchy, from line managers to directors, while others seek customer feedback. A few cases even employ external providers for impact measurement. The timeline of measurement is equally diverse, ranging from in-programme formative measurements for real-time adjustments to indicators demonstrating impact on behaviours over a range of durations, from within the year to up to a decade of ongoing investments with a focus on both business and people.

The introduction of technology and the active use of peers as feedback and support mechanisms have brought interesting developments. Standard practices now include video-taping and uploading personal projects at the beginning of a programme, progress reporting in between group modules, and webinars held months after the programme's completion.

A recurring theme in many cases was the challenge of growth. Learning and Development actively embraced this challenge by exploring and paving new pathways for businesses. Talent development award winners recognised a growing need for nurturing 'internal' talent to fill succession or entrepreneurial pipelines. On the other hand, organisational development award winners explicitly referred to organisational turning points, leveraging re-alignment and restructuring efforts to initiate large-scale interventions. These interventions aimed to foster engagement, problem-solving, innovation, and fresh perspectives.

Many projects were deeply embedded in the client's organisational and systemic design. They involved company-wide, multi-layer, intact teams that facilitated cascading ideas and changes throughout the organisation. Beyond this initial layer, numerous cases reported organisational and team impacts. Some referred to these as 'organisational experiments', while others adopted internal consulting formats. Additionally, Learning and Development interventions sometimes resulted in the rollout of leadership frameworks and even performance management systems.

Societal changes

Several initiatives aimed at positioning client organisations within their respective ecosystems were observed in addition to individual and organisational impact indicators. These initiatives included, among others, sustainability reporting by SMEs to align with their B2B supply chains, the redefinition of stakeholder management strategies, and efforts to secure favourable positions in industry rankings.

One of the most notable surprises in this year's collection of cases was the significant increase in submissions addressing Sustainable Development Goal (SDG)-type challenges. The cases received clearly reflected the heightened focus on social and ecological issues, which was triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic's aftermath. This trend wasn't limited to a single cluster, as many cases showcased the intersection of social and ecological concerns with business issues. As someone aptly noted, social and ecological issues are converging with business concerns more than ever before. Thus, alongside the recurrent cases focusing on culture and organisational transformation to support talent retention, enhance client-centricity, foster digital business agility, and promote organisational integration, a diverse array of cases emerged, spotlighting social entrepreneurship, diversity and inclusion, corporate volunteering, stakeholder recognition, sustainability reporting, and other related themes.

SOME FINAL COMMENTS ON THE INTERACTIONS BETWEEN RESEARCH AND PRACTICE

Building research from practice

As already indicated above, one of the main contributions of the Excellence in Practice awards to the field of executive development has been to motivate supplier-client partnerships to formalise their projects. And as such it feeds the body of knowledge in general and eventually research in academic-oriented organisations.

Importance of research-inspired practice

When looking at the first five years of the awards, the strong linkage between the executive education consultancy (as well as outside consultancies) activities facilitated customised executive education in areas such as OD, human capital, strategy development, and organisational change. It was also apparent that these endeavours cannot be claimed as an exclusive domain for academic institutions, on the contrary.

In the following five years, the visibility given to a wide variety of projects encouraged several unusual partnerships to come forward and apply. The initial success of applications with a focus on responsible management, and stakeholder management ideas prompted a broader batch of ecosystem development projects, collaboration, and partnerships in areas such as sustainability / ESG, etc., leading to stronger ties across all stakeholders.

In the last five years, these trends strengthened even further, and we have seen an increasing focus on societal challenges such as SDGs, people and the planet, economic growth and inclusion, etc..

A problem-solving perspective to research impact measurement

Professionals across the academic as well as non-academic supplier and client base use a wide body of research to address the challenges at hand. The impact of their projects was measured on the positive evolution of the issues and problems identified. One could see a double route here for measuring the impact of research: where was the research used in projects, and which of these projects were successful? As some of the suppliers are looking for brand recognition of their organisation through the awards, a few are also looking to 'market' their research.

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