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The Manager's Role in Training for Teamwork

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

In lists of the recent trends in learning and development, there is an ever-present emphasis on the individual learner. Whether it be personalized learning paths, interacting with microlearning or on-the-job coaching, there is a consistent lens of training being targeted to a single person. This trend overlooks the fact that many of the job tasks that employees complete in the course of a normal workday depend on each other. Most jobs rely on the inputs of others and produce outputs that may be used by several other people. In other words, the majority of work is a collaborative effort. As such, a perspective that training primarily impacts an employee's performance can fall short of recognizing the importance of teams in modern organizations.

This statement is certainly not meant to suggest that there is a willful ignorance of teams by L&D functions. There is plenty of attention paid in training offerings to the value of effective teamwork. There are virtual teams, sales teams, leadership teams and many other instances where training tools are targeting the whole rather than the individual parts. It goes without saying that the diversity in the backgrounds and experiences of a work team is part of what drives business innovation and achieves company goals.

We know that a vital component of learning is the socialization of newly-acquired knowledge and skills with colleagues and peers, whether informally over a cup of coffee or formally through cross-training initiatives. Few companies can succeed on the efforts of a single employee striving toward goals alone, they need teams to achieve them. And when new regulations need to be adopted, new technologies need to be absorbed or new strategies need to be enacted, it takes the collective effort of team members to do those things and a collective learning on their part to acquire the skills and tools to do so.

But do team members see their own training this way? And how much are their managers playing a role in supporting team-related training and team performance? To examine these issues in greater detail, Training Industry, Inc. and CrossKnowledge conducted a study to examine how organizations train teams and what managers are doing to support team-related training. In late 2017, 1,001 learners and managers completed a confidential survey on their perceptions of teamwork training at their respective companies.

THE STATE OF TEAM TRAINING

In this section, you'll learn about:
- How learners feel about the training they receive as a team
- What "team training" most often looks like across companies

In the introduction, we drew a line between the notion of individualized training in general and team-related training. As shown in Figure 1, less than half of survey respondents rated their team training as consistently effective. This response suggests that there is plenty of work to be done to improve not only L&D efforts in general but team-related training specifically.

FIGURE 1. *Ratings of Training Effectiveness*
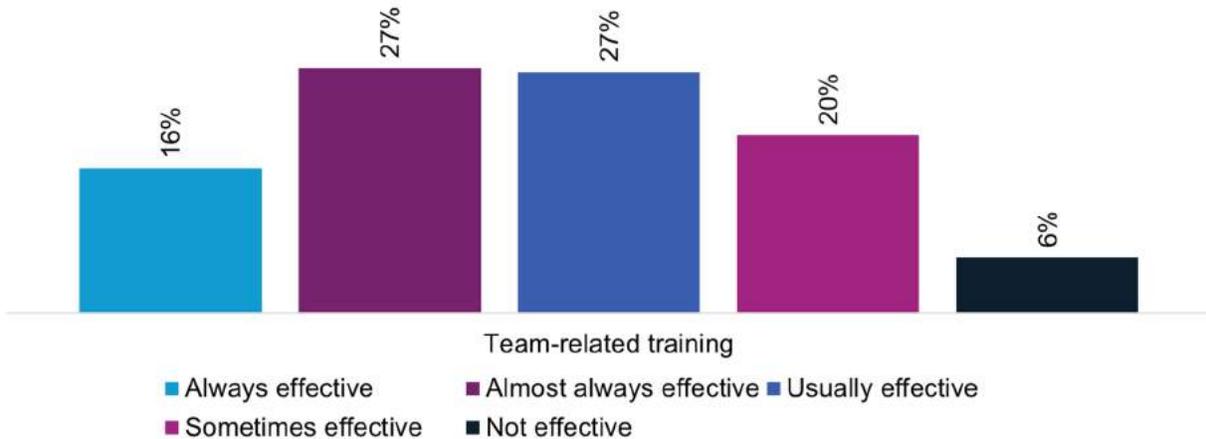
When it comes to team-related training, however, all topics are not created equal. While much of the training content an employee encounters is directed at him or her specifically, we were interested in what kinds of training are offered that expressly deal with team skills or tend to be delivered in group settings.

As shown in Figure 2, the topics identified by respondents as common to team-related training initiatives were quality training, technical training (e.g., IT tools), strategies for team efficiency and compliance. Interestingly, the topics that explicitly have to do with teams – namely, team efficiency, team cohesion, and team selling – were not offered universally. This could prove to be a problem for many organizations, especially those that rely heavily on teams of knowledge workers.

FIGURE 2. *Offerings of Team-Related Training Topics*

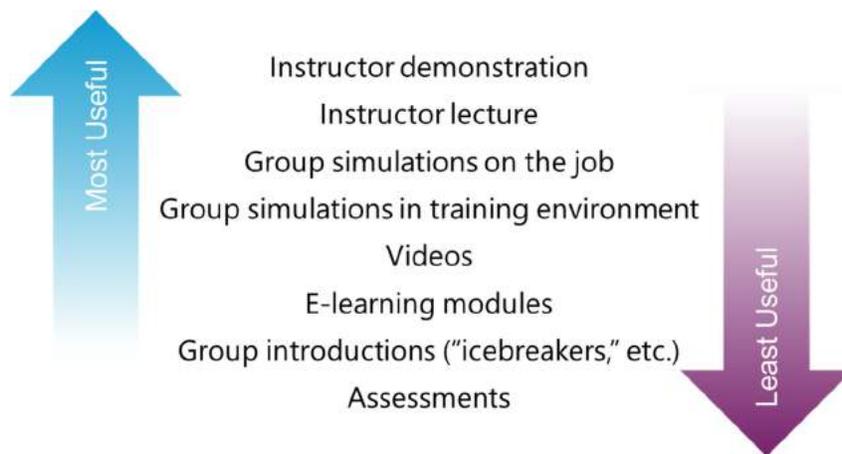| Topic	Percentage
Quality training	46%
Technical training	45%
Team efficiency	43%
Compliance/legal training	43%
Continuing education	39%
Company climate/culture	33%
Soft skills/team cohesion	32%
Onboarding	28%
Team selling	16%

Next, we asked respondents what types of activities are typically incorporated into team-related training at their companies. These training activities are topic agnostic – that is, they can be applied across a range of different types of learning content. As shown in Figure 3, the most common activities encountered in team-related training are instructor lectures (i.e., to acquire new knowledge), e-learning modules and videos.

FIGURE 3. *Experience with Team-Related Training Activities*
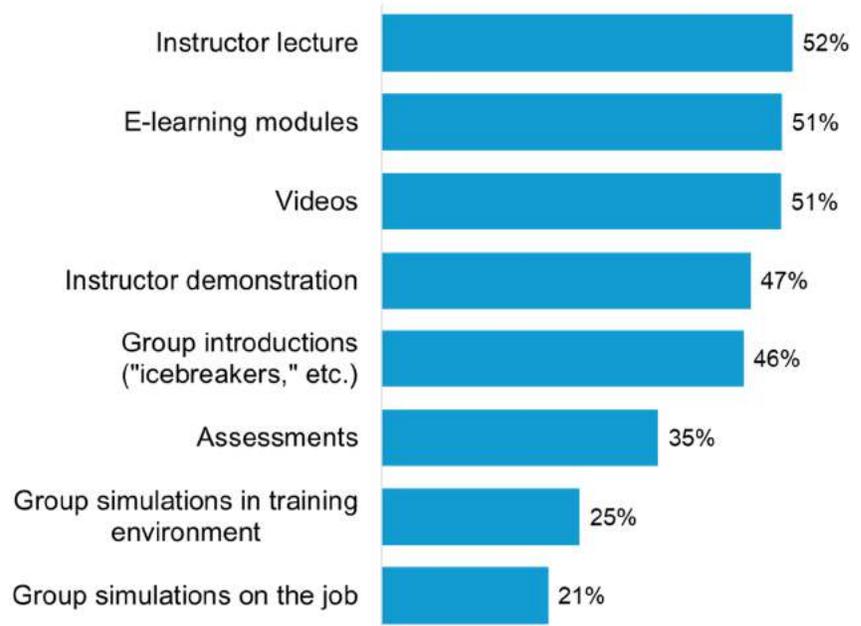
It is significant that all three of these activities, reportedly used by over half of the companies represented in this research, are usually considered "passive" learning experiences. As such, learners can engage with these activities at almost any scale; a group of five learners can complete an e-learning module, view a video lesson or listen to a lecture just as easily as a group of 50 learners. Of particular note is

Activity	Percentage
Instructor lecture	52%
E-learning modules	51%
Videos	51%
Instructor demonstration	47%
Group introductions ("icebreakers," etc.)	46%
Assessments	35%
Group simulations in training environment	25%
Group simulations on the job	21%

that the most immersive learning experiences in team-related training are group simulations on the job or in a training context (both physical and virtual), and these are used least often by companies.

FIGURE 4. *Usefulness Rankings for Team-Related Training Activities*

Most Useful →

Instructor demonstration
Instructor lecture
Group simulations on the job
Group simulations in training environment
Videos
E-learning modules
Group introductions ("icebreakers," etc.)
Assessments

→ Least Useful

Respondents were also asked to rank the activities in Figure 3 from most to least effective when it comes to improving team performance. As seen in Figure 4, our results showed that the most effective training activities are instructor demonstrations of new skills, group introductions and other activities that promote team cohesion, and group simulations. What is notable, however, is that half of companies use videos and passive online learning for team-related training, yet they rank low in terms of their impact on team performance. Our results indicate that while these delivery methods may be useful for presenting information, in a team setting, a "media-rich" training experience may not be adding much utility in terms of driving performance.

THE STATE OF TEAM MEMBER RELATIONSHIPS

In this section, you'll learn about:
- The common interpersonal skills that exist on teams
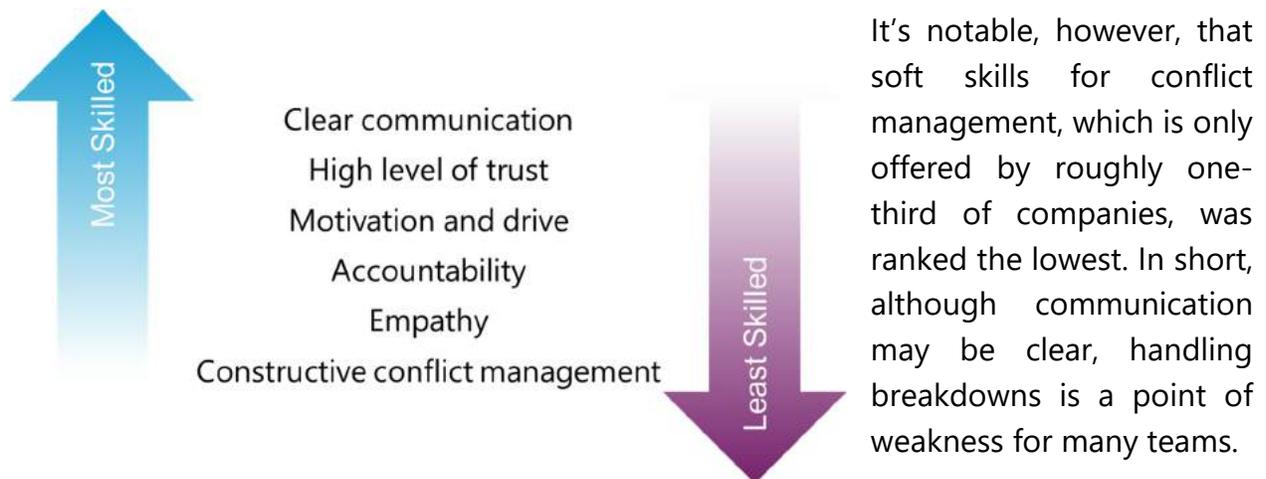- The impact of team training on the relationships between team members

As noted in the introduction, any workplace team requires coordination, cooperation and a sharing of work tasks among a group of employees with complementary skills and knowledge. By definition, a team has a common, shared goal. Although the team members may approach tasks differently, they need to rely on one another, as their work both impacts and is impacted by the work of others. In that respect, the nature of the relationships among team members is a critical factor in their collective performance.

But this kind of collaboration does not happen automatically. Teams need to be able to communicate with each other. As one survey respondent commented:

> *"I think there is a lack of collaboration. There is a sense of disjointedness. We are all aware of what the other is doing, but not enough ideas are brought in and communicated."*

With this in mind, it is important to talk about the communication skills that employees feel their teams possess. In Figure 5, we asked survey respondents to rank the skills of their team from strongest to weakest. As can be seen, communication, trust, and motivation received the highest rankings.

FIGURE 5. *Rankings of the Level of Team Interpersonal Skills*

Clear communication
High level of trust
Motivation and drive
Accountability
Empathy
Constructive conflict management

It's notable, however, that soft skills for conflict management, which is only offered by roughly one-third of companies, was ranked the lowest. In short, although communication may be clear, handling breakdowns is a point of weakness for many teams.

Many teams suffer from dysfunction – if that were seldom the case, there would be no need for training on team cohesion. In some companies, the interactions between team members can be stilted, as described in these comments from survey respondents:

> *"We could do a better job talking about work related things that are bothering us, rather than internalizing and festering."*

> *"There are times when we have conflict with one another and we all think we are right."*

In some instances, other obstacles in the organization affect the functioning of teams:

> *"Because the team is geographically separated, one group doesn't always update the other group in a timely manner."*

> *"We need more team layers. We are very understaffed and in a hiring freeze."*

On other teams, the interactions can be downright toxic. Several respondents made comments that portray broken relationships among team members:

> *"My place of employment allows for group bullying, and my manager refuses to address the issue."*

> *"I'm the only one that keeps us from being all fired. They choose not to work and do their job."*

"There are a few that consider themselves better than the rest of us and they choose to do what they want, instead of working efficiently to maximize potential and keep the workload caught up."

To gauge the quality of team interactions, respondents answered a series of questions about how well they understand (and feel understood by) their team members and the extent to which the tenor of communication within the team is positive. Across all the items shown in Figure 6, at least two-thirds of survey respondents agreed that the atmosphere of their work group is collaborative and conducive to effective work; on average, 16 percent were neutral and 7 percent disagreed with each item. While these data are encouraging, there was a relatively low level of "strongly agree" responses to these items, which does not suggest a universally upbeat endorsement of the quality of teamwork.

FIGURE 6. *Ratings of Team Relationship Quality*
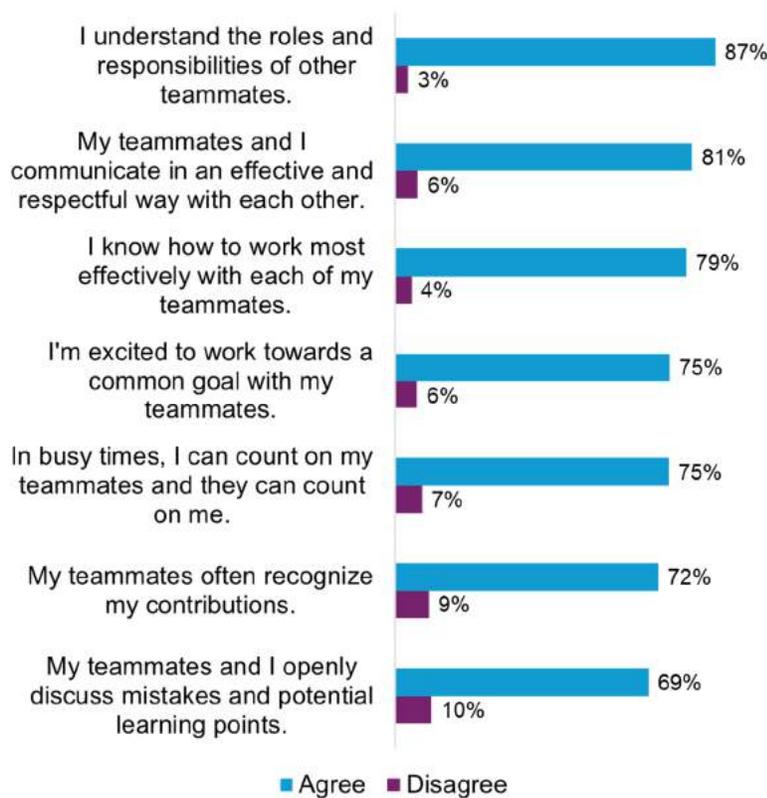
These results show that there are some universal strengths of teams in companies, but as seen in the comment excerpts, also many areas that are ripe for improvement.

Exploring these team member relationships further, we noted that there was a pronounced impact on the number of "strongly agree" responses when considering the quality of team training provided by their organization. For those organizations who were rated as providing effective team training (based on the data presented in Figure 1), an average of 54 percent of those respondents strongly agreed with the items in Figure 6. However, for those organizations who were rated as providing ineffective team training, the average across the same items in Figure 5 was only 15 percent. Moreover, this division in ratings is not necessarily driven by a difference in perspective between the led and their

leaders. For managers, the average proportion of "strongly agree" responses across the items in Figure 6 was 31 percent, and for learners, the average was 27 percent.

Considering all these pieces of information, these results suggest that although many teams are generally without dysfunction, the support of team effectiveness through training appears to have a clear influence on the perceived quality of relationships among team members.

In summary, the results of the preceding sections on teams showed that:

- Only 42 percent of learners see the team-related training provided by their company as always or almost always effective.
- Many companies offer a broad range of training topics that are delivered in a team context, but improving team functioning are not the most common.
- Most teams have positive relationships between team members – this is especially true when team-related training is effective.

THE PERCEPTIONS OF MANAGERS BY THEIR TEAMS

In this section, you'll learn about:
- The common level of involvement by managers with their teams
- How team members generally perceive their managers
- How team member perceptions are driven by their managers' involvement

The impact of a good leader can make or break a team. As one survey respondent commented:

"With the right leader, a team will meld together."

So, we asked respondents to estimate the amount of involvement their managers have with their teams. They answered on a scale of 0 (seldom involved, with little or no interaction and most decisions delegated to the team) to 100 (very involved, with frequent interaction with the team and directly leading decisions).

FIGURE 7. *Average Learner Ratings of Managerial Involvement with Teams*
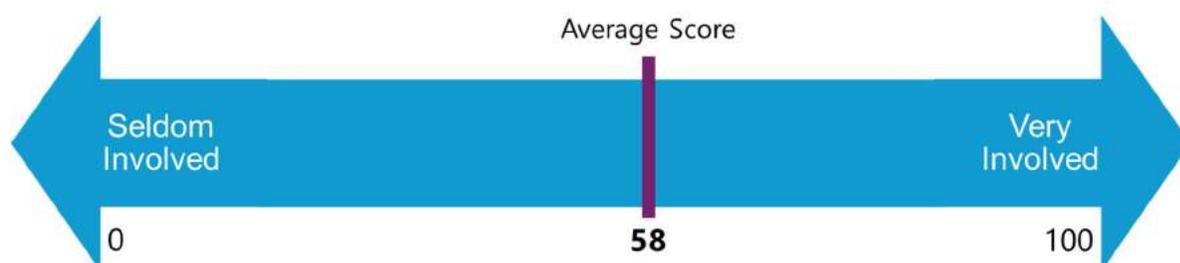
The average score on this rating across all respondents was 57.9, as seen in Figure 7. This suggests that the majority of managers are moderately involved with their teams, with periodic check-ins and delegating some but not all decision-making. However, ratings tended to vary around the average by about 26 points, so while there are many managers who are more involved, there are also many who pay little attention to their team.

But was there a trend between a manager's involvement and the general quality of team-related training provided by an organization? As shown in Figure 8, the answer is, "yes." At companies who provide effective team training, managers are involved much more with their teams; in organizations where team training is subpar, managers are less concerned with the healthy functioning and direction of teams.

FIGURE 8. *Ratings of Managerial Involvement with Teams by Training Effectiveness*

Beyond how a manager might be involved with their teams, we were interested in how team members view their managers. Figure 9 on the following page shows the results for ratings across several items related to how learners perceive their managers and how these managers interact with their teams. As shown, the results were mostly positive; on average, 67 percent of respondents were in agreement with all the items, whereas only 15 percent disagreed. Although not shown in the figure, an average of 18 percent of respondents were neutral (i.e., neither agreed nor disagreed) with these items.

Similar to the results on the level of managerial involvement, learners from companies who provided effective team training were also more likely to rate their managers more positively. Across all items shown in Figure 9, 60 percent of respondents at companies with effective team training agreed with these items, compared to 14 percent of respondents at companies with ineffective team training. In short, effective team-related training appears to go hand-in-hand with a leadership culture that is viewed favorably by learners.

FIGURE 9. *Ratings of Managers' Approach to Relationships and Teams*

	Agree	Disagree
I can speak openly with my manager, even in times of difficulty.	72%	15%
I know my manager has the team's best interest in mind.	71%	12%
Overall, my manager is very trustworthy.	69%	12%
I share with my manager an understanding of how we would like to achieve our goals.	68%	13%
My manager fosters strong team collaboration.	65%	14%
My manager knows how to help when conflict arises.	64%	16%
I recognize my manger as a coach.	59%	20%

The data on perceptions of managers showed a pronounced pattern, however, when split by the level of involvement a manager has with his or her team. We created the designations of low, moderate and high manager involvement by separating the data from Figure 7 into thirds (e.g., "high manager involvement" represents a rating of 67-100). As shown below in Figure 10, the positive perceptions of a manager are driven largely by the level of involvement that manager has with the team being managed.

FIGURE 10. *"Strongly Agree" Ratings of Managers' Approach to Teams by Managerial Involvement*

	Low Manager Involvement, N = 184	Moderate Management Involvement, N = 432	High Manager Involvement, N = 385
My manager fosters strong team collaboration.	3%	15%	51%
I know my manager has the team's best interest in mind.	4%	25%	60%
My manager knows how to help when conflict arises.	4%	16%	48%
I recognize my manger as a coach.	3%	15%	44%
I share with my manager an understanding of how we would like to achieve our goals.	4%	17%	43%
I can speak openly with my manager, even in times of difficulty.	11%	21%	53%
Overall, my manager is very trustworthy.	9%	26%	57%

In summary, the results of this section showed that:

- Managers tend to be moderately involved in the teams they lead; involvement tends to be higher when the company also provides effective team-related training.
- The more involved they are with the teams they lead, the more that managers tend to be viewed positively by team members.

TRAINING + MANAGERS = TEAM PERFORMANCE
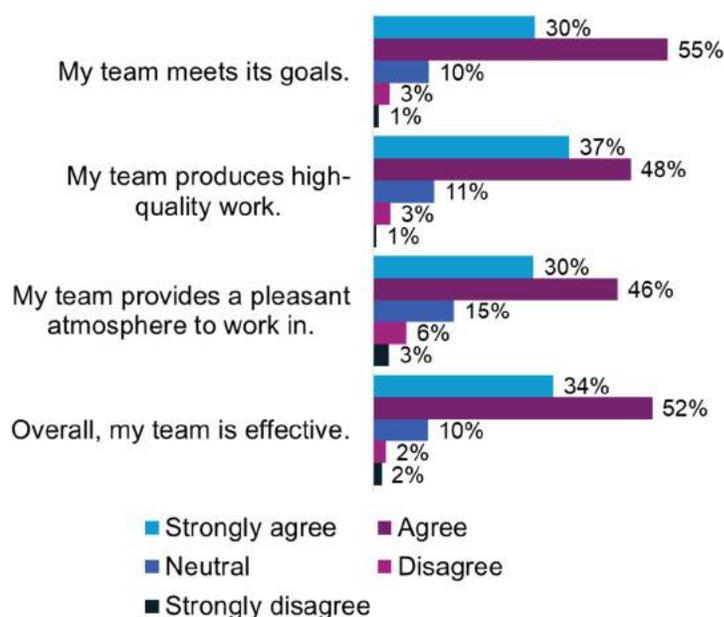
In this section, you'll learn about:

- How team members see the impact of team training on their performance
- How the level of managerial involvement affects team performance

Perhaps the most important outcome in any discussion of work teams is performance. Although few people work in solitary roles, many team members may feel like they do. Multiple survey respondents made comments to that effect:

"Our team is missing a sense of working together to achieve a goal. It's focused on individual efforts, regardless of team goals."

"We need more cross-training and teamwork... we are sometimes divided."

FIGURE 11. *Ratings of Team Performance*

My team meets its goals.
- 30% Strongly agree
- 55% Agree
- 10% Neutral
- 3% Disagree
- 1% Strongly disagree

My team produces high-quality work.
- 37% Strongly agree
- 48% Agree
- 11% Neutral
- 3% Disagree
- 1% Strongly disagree

My team provides a pleasant atmosphere to work in.
- 30% Strongly agree
- 46% Agree
- 15% Neutral
- 6% Disagree
- 3% Strongly disagree

Overall, my team is effective.
- 34% Strongly agree
- 52% Agree
- 10% Neutral
- 2% Disagree
- 2% Strongly disagree

■ Strongly agree ■ Agree
■ Neutral ■ Disagree
■ Strongly disagree

To gauge to extent to which such sentiments are common, we asked respondents several questions related to team performance outcomes, as displayed in Figure 11. Despite the type of reservations communicated in the above comments, on average over 75 percent of respondents agreed that their team is high-functioning, and less than 10 percent disagreed that their team performs well.

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However, there are clear differences in these ratings based on the effectiveness of the training that companies make available. Figure 12 shows the proportion of "strongly agree" responses to the items about team performance. As can be seen, companies that provide effective team-related training are more likely to yield teams with better performance when it comes to meeting goals, producing quality work, providing a positive team climate and overall team effectiveness.

FIGURE 12. *"Strongly Agree" Ratings of Team Performance by Training Effectiveness*

The pattern of results could not lead to any other conclusion: *A manager is a key ingredient to team performance*. Again, a manager does not dictate the level of skill on a team, and team-related training appears to play a major part of driving both a team's climate and their outcomes, but Figure 13 below shows that for companies wishing to drive team performance, the manager of that team cannot afford to be uninvolved. He or she must be as involved as possible, have frequent interaction with the team and directly lead decision-making.

FIGURE 13. *"Strongly Agree" Ratings of Team Performance by Managerial Involvement*

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

In the course of this report, we've established that for team-related training:

- Fewer than half of learners see team-related training as consistently effective.
- Many companies offer a broad range of team-related training topics.
- There is a disconnect between the types of activities common to team-related training and the perceived effectiveness of these activities by learners.
- The majority of teams are seen as having collaborative cultures and positive relationships between team members.

When it comes to the manager's role in teams and their training:

- Managers tend to be more involved in teams when the company provides effective team-related training.
- Managers are viewed more positively the more involved they are with the teams they lead.
- Team performance appears to be strongly driven by managerial involvement.

The last point bears elaboration: a manager is a key ingredient in team performance. However, the burden of team performance is not *completely* on the shoulders of the manager. For as much as a manager can be involved with a team, they cannot drive the skill level of team members. So, while a manager definitely has an impact on a team's performance, the functioning of team members and their ability to collaborate also depends on the quality of the relationships between team members, which tends to be highest when the team-related training provided by a company is consistently effective.

Taken together, the results of this research suggest that companies need to attend carefully to the team-related training they provide to their learners. Further, managers must be involved with their teams as much as possible in order to boost team performance. As team leaders, the managers of workgroups need to champion effective team training that fosters a positive team climate and clear communication among team members. It is the combination of these factors, rather than either effective training or an involved manager in isolation, that appears to be the recipe for team effectiveness and success.
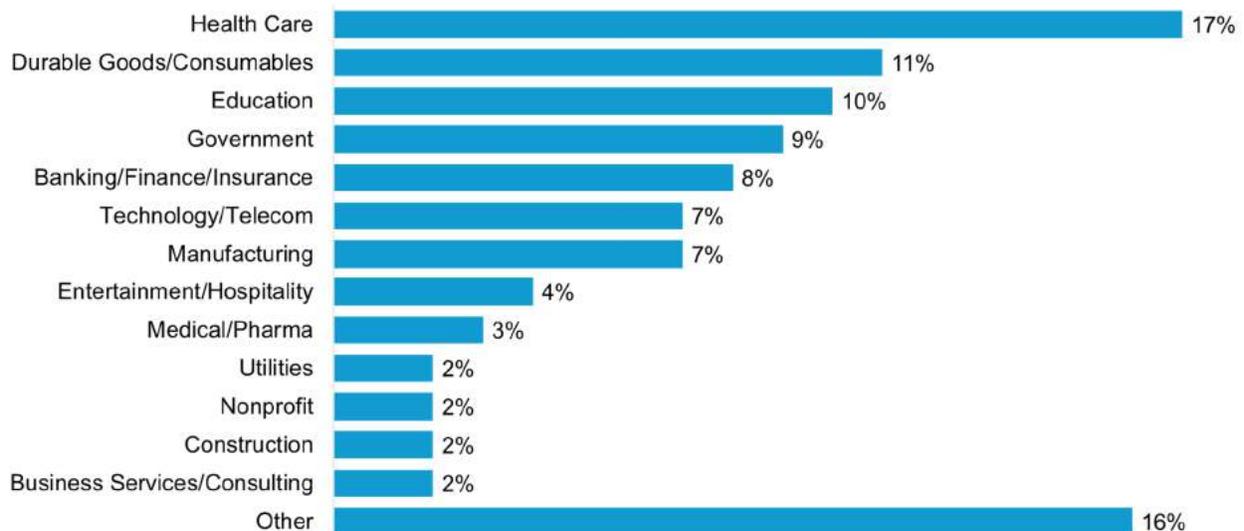
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STUDY DEMOGRAPHICS

Figures 14 through 17 provide context on the 1,001 survey respondents who participated in this research. They summarize the companies the respondents represent and the functional areas/departments supported by their roles within the organization.
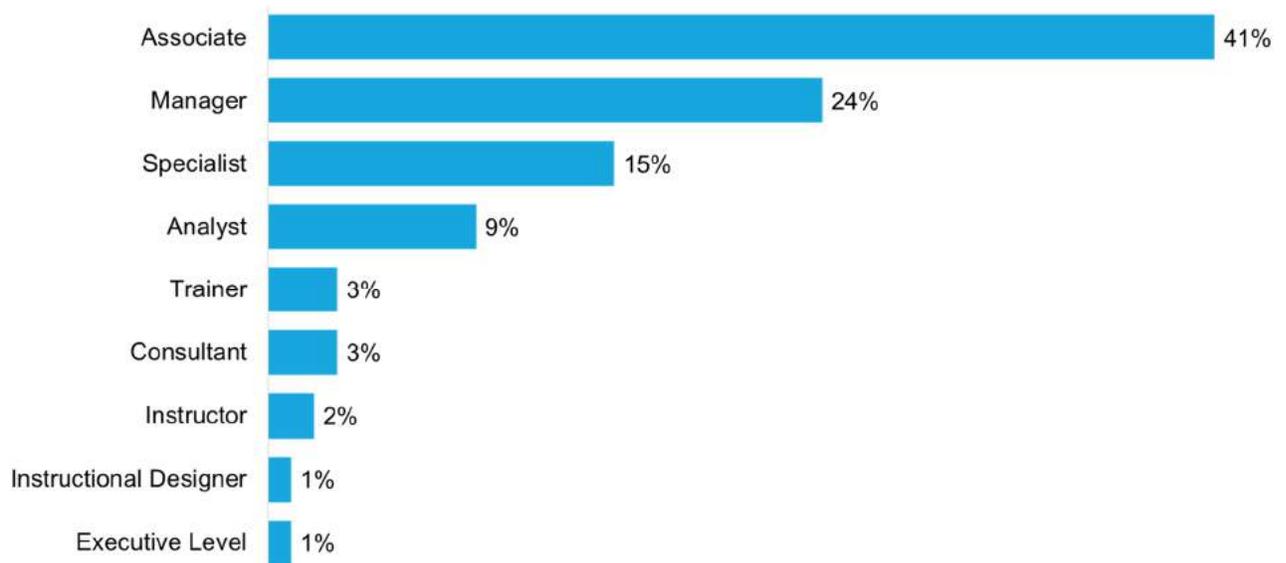
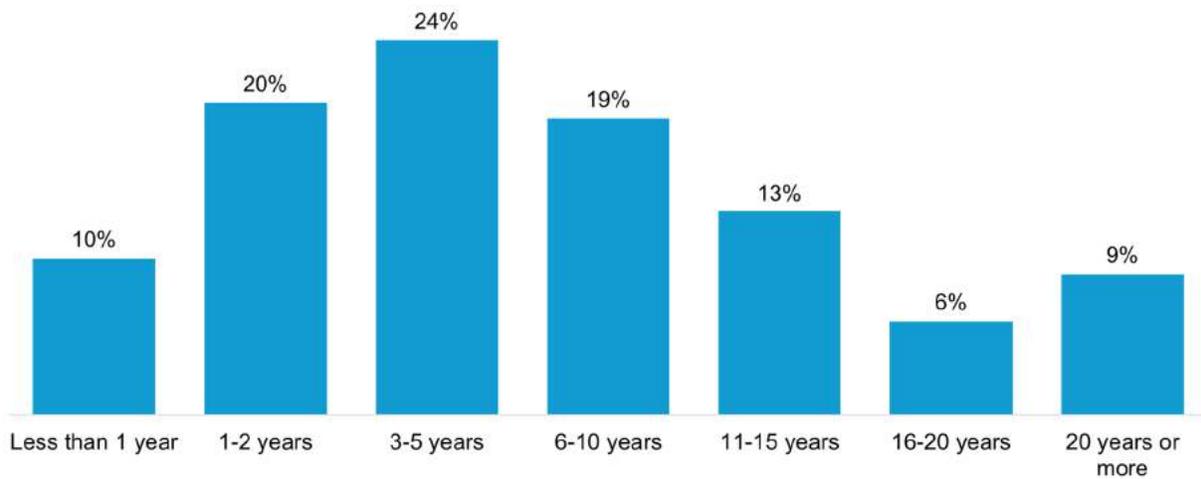**FIGURE 14**. *Organizational Size by Employee Count*
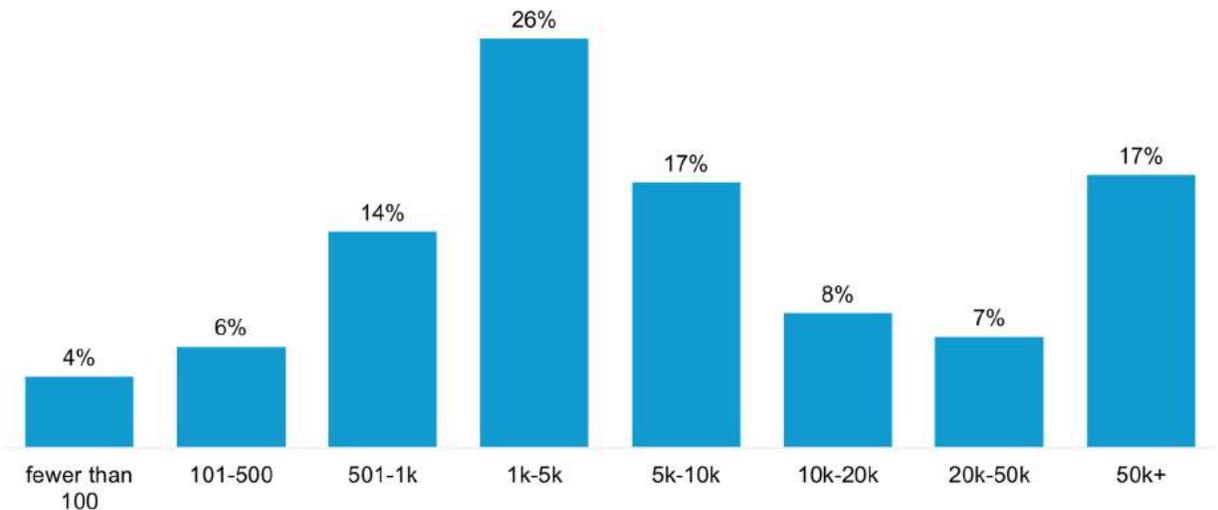
FIGURE 15. *Industries Represented*

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FIGURE 16. *Job Roles Represented*

Role	Percentage
Associate	41%
Manager	24%
Specialist	15%
Analyst	9%
Trainer	3%
Consultant	3%
Instructor	2%
Instructional Designer	1%
Executive Level	1%

FIGURE 17. *Job Tenure of Respondents*

Tenure	Percentage
Less than 1 year	10%
1-2 years	20%
3-5 years	24%
6-10 years	19%
11-15 years	13%
16-20 years	6%
20 years or more	9%

ABOUT THIS RESEARCH

ABOUT CrossKnowledge

CrossKnowledge, part of the Wiley group, is a leader in cloud-based distance learning solutions. Its full SaaS solutions are based on exclusive learning technologies, delivering the most sought-after content in the world and a range of accompanying services. CrossKnowledge solutions enable fast workforce empowerment and global strategic alignment, guaranteeing a unique learning experience for the individual and a real return on investment for the organization. CrossKnowledge operates worldwide and serves companies including global enterprises, mid-sized companies and the education sector, spanning more than five million users.

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