



Learnings from a successful transformation to a high-performance organization: a longitudinal case study

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Abstract

An increasing number of organizations embark on a journey to transform themselves into a high-performance organization (HPO) to be able to better deal with the changes in their environment. Unfortunately, in the current literature hardly any approaches are described that can support them during this transformation. One promising approach, the (Waal and Heijtel, *Meas Bus Excell* 21:101–116, 2017) HPO transformation approach, has only been validated in one instance. This study outlines an additional validated approach. A simplified version of the aforementioned transformation approach (Waal et al. *The high-performance finance function, handbook for the future-oriented financial professional*, IGI Global, Hershey, 2022) was used at a case company which in 5 year time transformed into an HPO. Based on a questionnaire which collected and evaluated interventions undertaken by the case company, coupled with an extensive interview on the interventions with the manager of the case company, the interventions were categorized in the HPO transformation approach. The HPO transformation approach made it possible to make a structured overview of the interventions, which gave insight into how the case company went about its successful HPO transformation. Thus, the research has both a theoretical and practical contribution. Theoretically, the currently rather limited academic literature on transformation approaches regarding high-performance organizations is extended with another validated case, thus further developing this line of research. Practically, organizations get access to a validated transformation approach, thereby increasing their chance on a successful HPO transformation.

Keywords High-performance organizations · HPO · Transformation approach · Change management

JEL Classification D02 · I29 · M14

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Introduction

COVID-19 has shown that circumstances can change very quickly, forcing organizations to react immediately to deal with fast-occurring threats. It is expected that this will become the “new normal” for business: changes in the world and in the economy will require them to be vigilant to be able to either take advantage of opportunities or to shield them from threats. These events will come in the shape of megatrends—large social, economic, political, and technological changes that are slow to form but once in place will have an influence for a considerable period of time (Naisbitt and Aburdene 1990)—and disruptors—defined as “someone or something that prevents something, especially a system, process or event, from continuing as usual or as expected” (Cambridge Dictionary 2021). For instance, recent research (Linthorst and de Waal 2020) showed that businesses can expect to deal, or are already dealing, with megatrends and disruptors: the increasing speed of technological advancement, more flexible employment, growing skills mismatches, demand for sustainable employment, environmental issues, continued globalization, increasing inequality in the world, more individualism, growing urbanization, continued cross-border migration, economic powershifts from the West to the East, resource scarcity, and new pandemics. These megatrends and disruptors can present business opportunities, but more often than not they are seen as threats to future business growth or even to the sustainability of the organization (Bhalla et al. 2017; Cheung-Judge 2017). Research has shown that business growth depends on a plethora of factors: management’s/owners’ motivation for growth, organization’s proximity to its client base/close contact with customers, ability to obtain the information required for sound decision-making, availability of tangible and intangible resources, expertise in managing growth, cost control, quality and desirability of offered goods/services, brand and company image, innovation capability, management’s/owners’ previous entrepreneurial and industry experience, proper education and managerial expertise, a good personal network of contacts, a clear vision, and a good (physical) location (Feindt et al. 2002; Majeed et al. 2021; Pugliese et al. 2021; St Jean et al. 2008).

One way for organizations to deal successfully with the aforementioned megatrends, disruptors and growth factors is for them to transform into so-called high-performance organizations (HPOs). An HPO is defined as an organization that achieves financial and non-financial results that are exceedingly better than those of its peer group over a period of 5 years or more by focusing in a disciplined way on that what really matters to the organization (de Waal 2021). Average-performing organizations, let alone badly performing ones, have great difficulty managing changing circumstances as these often require new ways of working (Cozzolino et al. 2017). In contrast, high-performing organizations are well able to cope with changing circumstances because of their flexibility and adaptability (de Waal 2012b). They have what is called “organizational sustainability” (Merriam et al. 2016) which is the ability of the organization to viably maintain its business operations whilst not negatively impacting social or ecological systems (Smith and Sharicz 2011). On the other hand, non high-performing organizations

run a serious risk of going out of business (Bharijoo 2005; By 2005). A logical consequence is, therefore, that an increasing number of organizations embark on a journey to transform themselves into an HPO which is important not only for organizational survival but also for their sustainable contribution to the economy.

Unfortunately, despite a plethora of transformation management approaches in the literature—see for example Burnes 2011; Whelan-Berry and Somerville 2010; Young 2009—no transformation approaches focusing specifically on creating an HPO can be found in the literature (de Waal and Heijtel 2016). There are a few noted exceptions. In exploring the practices of three companies, Beer (2001) asked why managers did not embrace the possibilities for their organizations to become an HPO. For those that did want to make that transformation with their companies, he developed a high-level approach called “Corporate transformation: a unit by unit process” but this process did not contain detailed steps. Wolf (2011) found, as “by-catch” of his research into what keeps organizations high-performing, the elements important for a rapid transformation of health-care organizations into HPOs. These elements, however, did not seem to have resulted in a comprehensive framework which can be applied by other types of organizations.

So the few studies into the transformation of organizations into HPOs do not offer detailed information on how to do this, for instance by offering a step-by-step guide. That is, until the research of de Waal and Heijtel (2017) who developed and tested a transformation approach specifically for the transition of an organization to an HPO. The limitation of their study, as these authors remarked at the end of their 2017-article, was that their approach had been validated at only one organization and they suggested that, therefore, the HPO transformation approach should be tested at more organizations. The aim of the study described in this article is not only to do just that, validating the de Waal and Heijtel (2017) approach at another organization operating in a different industry than their case organization, but to also introduce several simplifications to their original approach. In this way the research will have both a theoretical and a practical contribution. Theoretical, as we extend the currently rather limited academic literature on transformation approaches regarding high-performance organizations with another validated case, thus helping this line of research further along. Practically, as organizations cannot only develop more trust in the additional validated transformation approach of de Waal and Heijtel (2017) but also know that this approach has become easier to apply, thereby increasing their changes on a successful HPO transformation.

This remainder of this article is structured as follows. The next section discusses the HPO framework for which we are validating the transformation approach. This transformation approach is described in the subsequent section. Then, the case company is introduced, followed by the methodology section. Then, the results of the HPO Diagnoses conducted at the case company are given. Subsequently the HPO transformation approach is applied on the case company, to inventorize the interventions made by the case company in order to transform successfully to an HPO. The article ends with a conclusion and the limitations of the research and suggestions for future research.

The HPO framework

At the center of our research is the HPO Framework as developed by de Waal (2012a; b). This framework was used by de Waal and Heijtel (2017) while developing their approach for an HPO transformation, and it is also the framework that the case company in our research applied. The de Waal's HPO framework is a conceptual, scientifically validated structure which practitioners can use for analyzing how high performing their organizations are and to decide what is needed to improve organizational performance and make it sustainable (de Waal and Goedegebuure 2017). Regarding the framework Do and Mai (2020) state, based on an extensive literature review, that "across the HPO literature, we found only the HPO framework developed by de Waal (2012a) as an example of scientifically validated conceptualization of HPO."

The HPO Framework was developed after an extensive review of 290 academic and practitioner publications on high performance (de Waal 2020). For each of the 290 studies, elements that the authors indicated as being important for becoming a HPO were identified and categorized. Because different authors used different terminologies, similar elements were put in the same category. The resulting 189 categories were labeled 'potential HPO characteristics'. For each of the potential HPO characteristics the 'weighted importance' was calculated, i.e., the number of times that it occurred in the examined studies. Finally, the characteristics with the highest weighted importance were considered the HPO characteristics. These 89 characteristics were subsequently included in an HPO survey which was administered worldwide and encompassed over 3200 respondents. In this survey, the respondents were asked to indicate how well they thought their organizations were performing as to the HPO characteristics (on a scale of 1–10) and also how the results of the organization they worked at compared to those of peer groups.

The data of the respondents were statistically analyzed (de Waal 2020). In the first step of this statistical analysis, a principal component analysis with oblimin rotation was performed. This yielded 42 characteristics with a loading higher than 0.300 in six factors. These were then put in a nonparametric Mann–Whitney test, which resulted in 35 characteristics in five factors. The factor scales showed acceptable reliability with Cronbach alpha values close to or above 0.70. To verify whether the potential HPO factors were correlated with competitive performance, a correlation matrix was constructed. This matrix showed that the five factors were all correlated with competitive performance, see Table 1.

Table 1 Correlation between the HPO factors and competitive performance

HPO factor	Correlation	Significance
Continuous improvement and renewal	0.212	0.000
Openness and action orientation	0.165	0.001
Management quality	0.248	0.000
Employee quality	0.277	0.000
Long-term orientation	0.327	0.000

The five HPO factors are (in Appendix 1 the HPO characteristics are listed):

- *Management quality.* Belief and trust in others and fair treatment are encouraged in an HPO. Managers are trustworthy, live with integrity, show commitment, enthusiasm, and respect, and have a decisive, action-focused decision-making style. Management holds people accountable for their results by maintaining clear accountability for performance. Values and strategy are communicated throughout the organization, so everyone knows and embraces these.
- *Openness and action-orientation.* An HPO has an open culture, which means that management values the opinions of employees and involves them in important organizational processes. Making mistakes is allowed and is regarded as an opportunity to learn. Employees spend a lot of time on dialogue, knowledge exchange, and learning, to develop new ideas aimed at increasing their performance and make the organization performance driven. Managers are personally involved in experimenting thereby fostering an environment of change in the organization.
- *Long-term orientation.* An HPO grows through partnerships with suppliers and customers, so long-term commitment is extended to all stakeholders. Vacancies are filled by high-potential internal candidates first, and people are encouraged to become leaders. An HPO creates a safe and secure workplace (both physical and mental), and dismisses employees only as a last resort.
- *Continuous improvement and renewal.* An HPO compensates for dying strategies by renewing them and making them unique. The organization continuously improves, simplifies and aligns its processes and innovates its products and services, creating new sources of competitive advantage to respond to market developments. Furthermore, the HPO manages its core competences efficiently, and sources out non-core competences.
- *Employee quality.* An HPO assembles and recruits a diverse and complementary management team and workforce with maximum work flexibility. The workforce is trained to be resilient and flexible. They are encouraged to develop their skills to accomplish extraordinary results and are held responsible for their performance, as a result of which creativity is increased, leading to better results.

The HPO research shows that there is a direct and positive relationship between the five HPO factors and competitive performance: the higher the scores on the HPO factors (HPO scores), the better the results of the organization, and the lower the HPO scores the lower the competitive performance. An organization can evaluate its HPO status by performing an HPO Diagnosis. This diagnosis consists of having management and employees fill in an HPO questionnaire, containing questions on the 35 HPO characteristics with possible answers on an absolute scale of 1 (very poor) to 10 (excellent), and then calculating the average scores on the HPO factors. The scores then gives the attention points, where the organization has to take action to improve in order to become an HPO.

Approach for the transformation to an HPO

In the original HPO transformation approach, as developed by de Waal and Heijtel (2017), there are five key steps consisting of a combination of organizational-, group- and individual-level transformation sub-steps. This creates a somewhat complex intermingled set of fifteen sub-steps and accompanying activities which need to be completed in order to obtain a successful HPO transformation. To simplify this approach, de Waal et al. (2022) developed one which consists of only four steps and ten sub-steps, which makes this approach—with the core approach as originally developed by de Waal and Heijtel (2017) still intact—more manageable. This approach is depicted in Fig. 1. In this figure, there are several boxes (and lines) which are dotted; these denote sub-steps that directly address the change process individuals will go through during the HPO transformation process.

Key step 1: Develop a clear and compelling HPO vision and HPO transformation action plan

Sub-step 1.1

The first step in the HPO transformation process consists of creating a clear and compelling HPO vision (sub-step 1.1 in Fig. 1). Every successful HPO transformation has a vision that is both easy to communicate and attractive to all employees. This HPO vision should describe the aspects, characteristics, and outcomes of the desired state of the organization as an HPO. A positive and inspiring vision of HPO

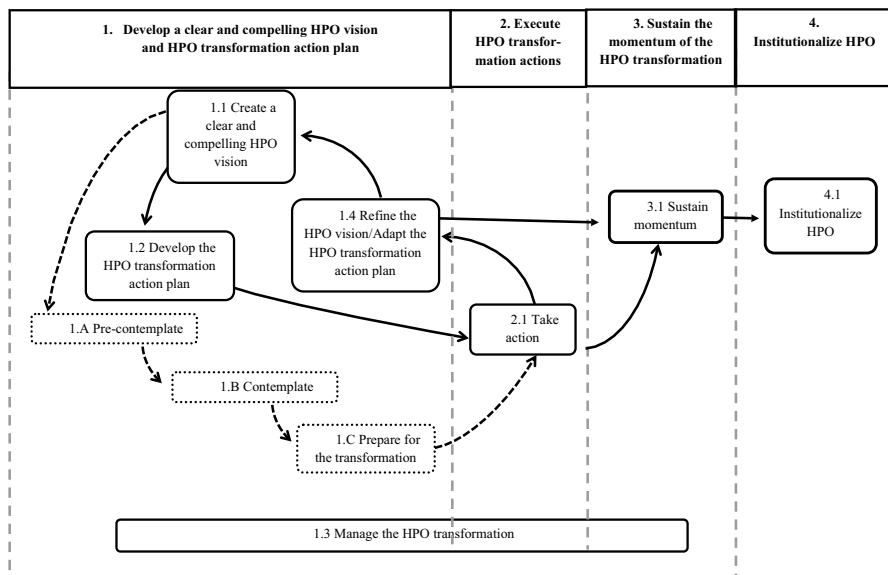


Fig. 1 Key and sub-steps of the HPO transformation approach

is created by managers and employees together, which makes them enthusiastic and creates something they can believe in. The HPO vision contains the purpose of the transformation and the reasons it is worth undertaking, and it describes the positive differences between the current and the desired state of the organization. Emotional arguments are used in creating and conveying an appealing picture of HPO by describing strong positive benefits of a successful transformation using words with an emotional and positive connotation and metaphors. When discussing the vision, emotions are used to convey warmth and sincere commitment. Fears about the transformation are reduced by emphasizing the opportunities being an HPO brings. The consequences of what HPO will mean for the organization and the employees are made tangible by explaining the implications of becoming an HPO for the structure, processes, and people of the organization. What will or will not change is made clear, and assurance is given that good things, such as existing social security arrangements, will not be tampered with. The role that employees can and will play in the HPO transformation is also discussed. Thus, employees can picture what HPO will bring them, how they will personally benefit from it (“what’s in it for me”), and how they can contribute to it. They can start the transformation with an image of the end goal in their minds.

Sub-step 1.2

In sub-step 1.2, a clear strategy for the transformation, with short- and long-term objectives, is set, so that it can be steadfastly guided. The HPO transformation is visibly made the most important priority for the organization for the coming years. Then, a flexible and adaptive transformation action plan is made. Priorities for the transition actions are set, based on the outcome of the HPO Diagnosis, and resources are made available for those actions. Transformation goals and a timeline for achieving them are set to build momentum and show progress from day 1. Time should be taken to become an HPO, and ensure the planning allows for unexpected setbacks or delays to be dealt with without having to change the complete action plan. Current HPO-like activities should be taken into account and used as starting points for the plan. Running projects that have added value to HPO are incorporated, and other projects are not commenced or discontinued to free up time and resources. The HPO transformation plan should not only deal with changes in the current organization (with its current processes) but also anticipate (fundamental) changes in the environment and the organization that may affect the HPO transformation. The employees should closely be involved in deciding how to become an HPO and should have a say in the setup of the transformation action plan and the starting time for the transformation. In this way, the collective knowledge of the organization is mobilized and buy-in for the action plan is easily achieved. Finally, enough resources should be (made) available on a continuous basis to source the transformation into an HPO.

Sub-step 1.3

A special HPO transformation support structure is used to manage the transformation process through all its steps (sub-step 1.3). Such a transformation management

structure requires organizational members who are respected by their leaders, have the power to mobilize resources, and possess the political and interpersonal skills to guide the transformation process: the HPO Champion and HPO Coaches (de Waal, 2012b, 2020). These people support the employees throughout the sub-steps of the transformation process to move forward with the adoption and implementation of the HPO vision. The HPO Champion, who is the sponsor of the HPO transformation and is one of the senior executives in the finance management team, supervises the HPO transformation and takes responsibility for its success. The management team visibly drives the transformation and helps people by creating the conditions that make it possible for them to participate in the transformation. When management walks its talk, does what it says, shows the organization that HPO is really important by paying continuous attention to it, and gets its hands “dirty” by involving itself in some of the day-to-day transformation activities, the employees will follow suit.

Sub-step 1.4

It is possible that the HPO vision and the HPO transformation action plan have to be refined and adapted because of issues, challenges, or concerns that may arise as a result of the first actions executed (sub-step 1.4).

Sub-steps 1.A + B + C

Regarding the change process of individual employees, during the ‘pre-contemplate’ sub-step (sub-step 1.A), it is essential to start a dialogue with employees about the reason for the HPO transformation. This reason is based on a sense of urgency or a desire or aspiration. The most obvious reason is the burning platform caused by severe problems or a compelling event, for example, a change in strategy or in the execution of the current strategy because of dramatically changed circumstances or dramatically increased needs of the business. Reasons for change that can be given are showing how other organizations have made successful transitions, talking about current bottlenecks and failed projects and the costs of these to the organization, or indicating that the organization is not ready (enough) for the increasing dynamics of the economy and the environment. However, management should not focus only on “negative” reasons. A positive way to create commitment is to appeal to the ambition and pride of employees to work toward becoming the best organization in the sector. The gap between performance in the current state and the desired HPO state is quantified by the HPO Diagnosis, which shows the potential and opportunities that exist within the organization. Consciousness raising is needed to increase awareness about the required behaviors, processes, and solutions to transform the organization into an HPO. In addition, employees have to experience and express their feelings and emotions about these problems and solutions, because relief of strong emotional reactions to transformation processes can motivate them to change. During the ‘contemplate’ sub-step (sub-step 1.B), employees become aware of challenges of the HPO transformation and start to think about how to deal with these upcoming challenges. At this time, they consider changing their behavior, for instance, by self-revaluation, in which they assess their feelings and emotions about themselves and

define what exactly needs to be changed. During the ‘prepare for the transformation’ sub-step (sub-step 1.C), employees become committed to taking action and are actually already taking several behavioral steps. They have a plan of action and are making preparations and devising actions to change their behavior and thinking.

Key step 2: Execute the HPO transformation actions

In the second key step of the transformation process, employees are engaged in the transformation and, as a result, adopt the required changes needed in the organization (sub-step 2.1). The interventions in this key step provide support to employees, so that they can easily adopt the changes and modify their behaviors. Before they can change their work behaviors, the contingencies and causes that regulate behavior will first have to be changed and managed. Employees need help from management and encouragement to change and to counter their less effective behaviors. The sequence of attention points to be addressed—originating from the HPO Diagnosis—are carefully chosen. Although all attention points are important, it is best to stay practical and keep the transformation manageable; thus, choose the most logical order in which the organization is going to address these points. Do this based on the life cycle of the organization (what needs to be rejuvenated now); the current situation of the organization (what needs to be fixed right away); HPO-like projects that are currently going on (what can you augment); and the culture of the organization (the amount of change the organization can handle stipulates the speed of the transformation process). The execution of the transformation can begin once the majority of the sub steps are taken; there will be plenty of time during the process to change and adapt activities and/or the HPO transformation action plan, as well as the HPO vision (sub-step 1.4) if circumstances dictate this. During the transformation, employees have, and take, the opportunity to question, challenge, interpret, and ultimately clarify the goals of the different actions that need to be performed in order to become an HPO. They regularly engage in a dialogue to monitor behavior and ensure that it is aligned with the goals of the HPO transformation.

Key step 3: Sustain the momentum of the HPO transformation

Sustaining the momentum of the transformation entails making sure that the transformation actions receive adequate attention and resources; if this is achieved, the transformation does not run the risk of failing because of the urgency of daily operations or a lack of attention (sub-step 3.1). Management makes sure to keep sharing information with the employees about the importance of the transformation and the successes and challenges encountered during the ongoing transformation. This means discussing the current rate of transformation, the degree of organizational stability, the interference of the transformation with daily routine operations, the time spent on actions, and the possible damage from excessive change. Appropriate follow-up action are taken to either slow down or speed up the transformation process. Continued delivery of day-to-day services is balanced with transformation actions, making sure that the delivery of regular services is not disrupted by these

actions. The clients need to be serviced regardless of the ongoing internal changes in the organization. When the organization successfully completes a transformation action, a celebration is held, then the way forward for the next action is reviewed.

Key step 4: Institutionalize HPO

The HPO transformation and its outcomes have to be institutionalized, and being high-performing should become part of the organization culture, ongoing operations, and processes (sub-step 4.1). In this key step, the organization regularly (once every 18–24 months) checks whether it has improved its scores on the HPO factors and its results by conducting a subsequent HPO Diagnosis. From each diagnosis, additional or new attention points for the transformation are identified and then addressed with new actions. When the desired HPO status is reached, the organization takes time out to celebrate its achievements, to recuperate, and to enjoy its success. After the celebration, management evaluates and sets its sights on new objectives. In the spirit of continuous improvement, the new quality goals and targets are higher and more difficult than the old ones.

The case company: Centre of International Affairs

Rotterdam, with its over 651K population, has the highest percentage in The Netherlands of residents from non-industrialized nations. Just over 50% of the population are of non-Dutch origin or have at least one parent born outside the country. In addition, dozens of well-known international companies have their headquarters in Rotterdam, which is also Europe's largest seaport. This high level of multi-ethnic and multicultural diversity is a key driver of the Rotterdam University of Applied Science (RUAS) approach to internationalization. One of the university's main tasks is to use this diversity as an asset, and to empower students and staff to thrive and excel within an inclusive environment. RUAS educates its diverse student population to become reflective, responsive professionals capable of making valuable contributions to an increasingly globalized society.

To develop and support RUAS' internationalization activities, in 2014 the Centre of International Affairs (CoIA) was established. This department is charged with coordination of all policy, knowledge, information, communication and support processes related to internationalization. The staff, hitherto spread over several organizational units within RUAS, was brought together in this department and tasks were clustered. CoIA is the pivot in the cooperation between study programs, foreign partners and support services. CoIA has grown into a department that supports and guides the programs and students in the development of their internationalization ambitions and has developed specific expertise that is not available anywhere else within RUAS. In addition, the department offers practical support to international students regarding accommodation, insurance, municipal registration and visa applications.

CoIA currently employs 35 people who work in several sub-teams with specific tasks to further stimulate the internationalization of RUAS. Team Marketing and Recruitment focuses on recruiting international students for the English-language bachelor's and master's programs of RUAS. Team Exchange offers support to students wishing to gain short-term international experience, either international students who come to Rotterdam for 6 months to follow one of the English-language exchange programs, or RUAS' own students who want to study for 6 months at one of the partner universities. Team Staff Support advises on quality assurance in the field of internationalization, conducts research studies, and assists in the development of internationalization visions in education. This team also provides practical support in relation to fundraising, project management, communication, travel arrangements and emergency management. Team Student Support offers the above mentioned practical support to international students regarding accommodation, insurance, municipal registration and visa applications.

Research design and methodology

This exploratory study adopted a mixed method approach in the form of a longitudinal case study (Kwok 2012). Exploratory research is an unstructured research design to gain information on the studied phenomenon. Yin (1994) states that descriptive case studies describe certain situations in organizations, and are based mainly on observing and reporting. Exploratory research thus makes it possible for researchers to get first-hand information, ideas and opinions from people who are directly involved (Rajendra 2008). The quantitative research part in the mixed method approach entails the use of a questionnaire to collect the opinions of respondents, in a numerical way, on how far their organization is on the way to the HPO status (Gog 2015). The qualitative research part in the mixed method approach is the process of inquiry that aims to attain the in-depth understanding of a phenomena (Patton 1987). The main advantages of using a qualitative approach, in addition to quantitative data collection, are that the phenomenon under investigation can be studied in a natural setting; it allows what, why, how questions, to better understand the nature of the phenomenon; and it leads to increased understanding of unknown variables and allows probing particularly during interviews (Benbasat et al. 1987). In this study, semi-structured interviews are used (Yilmaz 2013). The case study format gives researchers the chance to directly interact with the owners and managers of the organisation, with the means of interviews, which leads to a great understanding (Yin 2009). In this case after the first HPO Diagnosis a workshop was held with several employees of the case company (the HPO Coaches, see "The HPO transformation at CoIA" for more information) in which the results of the diagnosis were discussed in depth. Notes were taken during this workshop. After the second HPO diagnosis, an extensive interview of several hours was conducted with the manager of the case company. This interview was recorded and afterward transcribed.

The HPO diagnoses at CoIA

The reason for CoIA to undertake the HPO diagnosis and subsequent transformation at CoIA was explained by CoIA's manager: "In 2014, as a new department within RUAS, CoIA had a lot of ambition to become the center of expertise regarding internationalization, with smooth and (often) tailor made services for study programs and students. To support this ambition, there was a need for concrete management information. Stakeholder surveys provided the necessary information but were often too vague; and the employee satisfaction surveys conducted annually gave too little concrete information needed to take developmental steps. When I was looking for a way to create more focused management information based on the various factors of the employee satisfaction survey and the stakeholder surveys, I came across the HPO framework. The limited set of factors, the five strands of success, and the insight which concrete steps for improvement were needed based on a diagnosis led me to decide to carry out an initial HPO diagnosis. CoIA has no comparison in its industry, and I was not interested in whether we are more successful and financially better than comparable departments within RUAS. The HPO framework and the ambition to become an HPO was what particularly appealed to me, that is why we started the transformation." Eventually, CoIA conducted three HPO Diagnoses, in 2015, 2017 and 2020. The results of these diagnoses are shown in Fig. 2.

In 2015, the average HPO score of CoIA was 7.7 which meant that the department was 77% on its way to becoming an HPO. In fact, the scoring area which is denoted as the "HPO cut-off level" is 8.5 (de Waal 2012a, 2020)—see the dotted straight line in Fig. 2—so CoIA was already well on its way to becoming an HPO. This was caused by the fact that the department was new: CoIA's manager was able to "hand-pick" the future employees for the department and she chose people

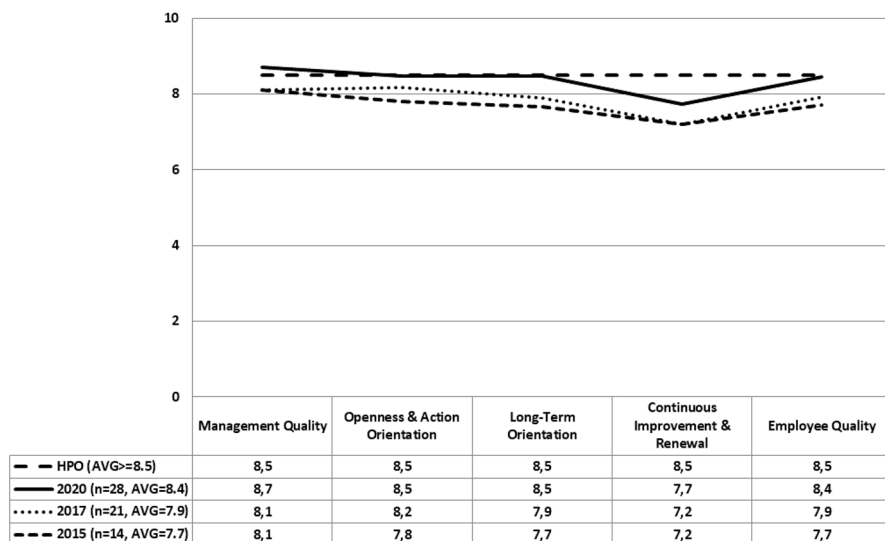


Fig. 2 Results of the three HPO Diagnoses at CoIA

who were change-minded, had a strong client focus and who were strong in process improvement. This gave CoIA a head-start relative to established organizations in becoming high-performing. The diagnosis did show several areas which could be strengthened, so that CoIA could become a “full-blown” HPO, with the most prominent being to provide CoIA’s employees with the right management information to excel (HPO characteristics 5 and 6 in Appendix 1), more emphatic use of all the intellect and knowledge in the organization (characteristics 9, 10 and 11), and for CoIA’s manager to become the undisputed high-performance leader of the high-performance CoIA (characteristics 20, 21, 25, 26, 27 and 28). To make sure that these improvements would be implemented, CoIA decided to install HPO Coaches. These were people from within the department that took the lead in the HPO transformation, making sure that HPO knowledge and experience was being build up and retained inside CoIA (in contrast to hiring consultants to do the transformation who, when leaving, take their knowledge with them). Using HPO Coaches also increased the motivation for HPO with CoIA’s employees as it became in this way their transformation (de Waal 2018).

The second HPO Diagnosis in 2017 showed an increase in the average HPO score of 0.2 which is slightly below an expected average increase when an organization works with discipline and focus on the transformation (de Waal 2012b). CoIA’s manager provided several reasons for this relatively small increase in HPO score: “At the time of the first survey, the department was still in its self-proclaimed honeymoon period. The newly formed department; the merging of teams, the attention to internationalization from upper management and the warm ambitious atmosphere of the department were remarkably positive. In 2017, at the time of the second survey, the honeymoon period was over and people across the board were a bit more critical of the functioning of the department, colleagues, and management. In addition, between the first and the second survey, the team had grown substantially, from 13 to 21 people. The new colleagues were brought into the positive departmental culture of CoIA but during that period not enough specific attention was given to HPO among these new colleagues. They learned to discover the concept along the way. In addition, when preparing the second survey, attention was given to the questions of the diagnosis. Because CoIA works in subteams it had to be clear beforehand, at least that was the idea, whether the question related to the subteam or to the entire CoIA team. However, this turned out not been clear. Several staff members reported that they were confused when answering the questions and no longer knew whether, precisely, they should be looking at the sub-team level or the CoIA level. Several colleagues thus experienced this preparation as an attempt to influence the answering. It is quite possible that they scored lower as a result.”

Compared to the first HPO diagnosis in particular attention points regarding improving the management information supply and involving people more (using their intellect and knowledge) had improved. Regarding the attention point of CoIA’s manager becoming high performing there was a mixed picture, most characteristics had improved; however, dealing with non-performers had deteriorated (characteristics 25 and 26). Naturally this became a specific attention point for CoIA to work on, in addition to three new attention points: strengthen continuous improvement by improving processes and implementing key performance indicators (characteristics

2, 3 and 4), strengthen relations with stakeholders (characteristic 30) and focus more on internal growth of people (characteristic 34). CoIA decided to continue with the HPO Coaches and to give them even more mandate in order to speed up the improvement of the attention points.

The third HPO diagnosis in 2020 showed that CoIA for all intents and purposes had become, in 5 years, an HPO with a score of 8.4. Basically only HPO factor Continuous Improvement and Renewal was lagging behind the other HPO factors, a result which is often found at other organizations (de Waal, 2020). Interestingly, the improvement of the original three attention points of the first HPO diagnosis had persevered. But also all attention points from the second HPO diagnosis had been addressed with a positive result. Therefore, the discussion focused not so much on new attention points but on consolidating the achieved improvements and making these sustainable, while at the same time continuing to strengthen the improvement, simplification and alignment processes in CoIA further.

The HPO transformation at CoIA

As mentioned before, we used the adapted de Waal and Heijtel (2017) transformation approach depicted in Fig. 1 to record what CoIA did in each step and sub-step to achieve a successful HPO transformation. For this, we have two inputs. First, during the second HPO diagnosis, we measured the effectiveness of the interventions which CoIA applied in the period between the first and second diagnoses (using the same method applied in de Waal and de Haas 2018). These interventions were scored by CoIA's employees, on a scale of 1–10, on three dimensions: "The intervention helped me increase my knowledge about HPO", "The intervention increased my willingness to show HPO behavior" and "The intervention helped me to actually show HPO behavior". The control question was whether the people had participated in the intervention or had heard about it or not. "Average effectiveness" was calculated as the average score given for the combination of the three dimensions. Second, after the third diagnosis, CoIA's manager was interviewed on the interventions that had taken place between the second and third diagnoses (as preparation for this interview she talked with the HPO Coaches beforehand about the past period). This interview was taped, then transcribed and the interventions abstracted from this transcription. Table 2 shows how CoIA dealt with the steps and sub-steps of the HPO transformation approach. This table was reviewed by CoIA's manager on accuracy and completeness.

Reviewing Table 2, three key core elements can be distilled that characterize the approach that CoIA undertook to become an HPO in 5 year time:

- *Team and individual ownership*: The implementation of the interventions was handled in such a way that it was clear from the start—and during the transformation could easily be emphasized by CoIA's manager—that the responsibility for a successful outcome lay squarely with the team and all its members. Moreover, the manager reminded team members regularly about their responsibility for their own development. Team members were expected to not "put

Table 2 Steps and sub-steps as applied by CoIA

Sub-step	Intervention
1.1 Create a clear and compelling HPO vision	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Defining CoIA's mission and vision: 'Becoming the center of expertise with regard to internationalization, with excellent and tailor-made services; thereby becoming the first HPO department of RUAS' • Defining CoIA's code of conduct • Creating a culture which can be described as 'CoIA is proud of her achievements, and creates a warm bath for students and new employees'
1.2 Develop the HPO transformation action plan	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Brighten up activities of projects that have to continue in such a way that they are not experienced as a burden due to the 'fun factor' obtained
1.3 Manage the HPO transformation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Introducing HPO Coaches, with the CoIA manager functioning as HPO champion • Visualizing the HPO strands of success (= factors) • Installing an internal communication group, responsible for not only communication but also the "fun activities" • Installing cross-functional teams to work on HPO interventions, led by HPO coaches • Stressing by the manager that the HPO interventions and team development are the responsibility of the team members themselves (and not only the manager's) • The manager having monthly meetings with the HPO coaches to review progress, generate ideas and stress an action-oriented attitude • Rotating the HPO coaches, making sure there is enough diversity and creativity among them
1.4 Refine the HPO vision/adapt the HPO transformation action plan	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Updating the HPO action plan with the team after the second HPO diagnosis
1.A Pre-contemplate	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conducting a workshop on cultural awareness • Creating a positive atmosphere because, by being smart with the budget CoIA could grow; and by getting internationalization on the strategic agenda of RUAS, which resulted in extra budget
1.B Contemplate	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conducting workshops with the subteams (to get to know the strengths/weaknesses of each team member)
1.C Prepare for the transformation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Asking each employee after the 2nd diagnosis which attention point s/he was going to address and take responsibility for, as part of one of the cross-functional teams • Conducting a workshop on innovative behavior, which was led by an artist • Pushing team members to talk with colleagues of other sub-teams about their ideas

Table 2 (continued)

Sub-step	Intervention
2.1 Take action	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conducting several workshops on giving and receiving feedback • Introducing key performance indicators • Conducting lean meetings and lean yellow belt training sessions • Conducting movie nights with films on cultural diversity (to increase the cultural awareness of team members)
3.1 Sustain momentum	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sharing HPO success stories in the weekly newsletter of the manager • Taking team trips to Berlin and Alicante • Asking an HPO coach from another company to present his experiences with an HPO transformation • Introducing the “employee of the month” • Conducting a team flow workshop • Paying continuous attention by the manager to the HPO Coaches and what they are doing • Addressing the team on their pride in the team and their quality of service • Making sure that HPO interventions are done together as a team as much as possible • Having a monthly CoIA lunch with an HPO theme • Placing HPO on the meeting agenda every month, send out regular reminders about why we do HPO, regularly look ahead to what will happen next in CoIA with regard to HPO
4.1 Institutionalize HPO	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Regularly conducting HPO diagnoses • Continuing with social events and HPO theme meetings • Repeating some of the interventions (as listed under sub-step 2.1) to reinforce and strengthen the improvements • Keeping the HPO coaches

the burden on the manager,” to make things happen and to make sure that things would go smoothly. The only activity the manager basically did was adjust here and there when necessary.

- *Team spirit*: From the start, it was clear to everybody in CoIA that becoming an HPO would be a team effort. This was emphasized in most interventions that were set up in such a way that always multiple team members, and often the whole team, were involved. In this way executing the HPO interventions itself supported and strengthened the team spirit which in turn helped the whole team to assume ownership of the HPO transformation.
- *Accessibility*: Many interventions were kept as simple as possible in their execution and as accessible as possible so all team members could partake in them. In addition, in many interventions a “fun factor” was built in so people looked forward to being part of them. Often the interventions were not even

labeled under the name of HPO so as not making them “too grand”. In this way, the interventions were not seen as a burden or extra work but as part of the day-to-day ongoings in CoIA.

Conclusions

The aim of the research described in this article was to make another validation of the transformation approach organizations can use when transforming into high-performance entities, as originally developed by de Waal and Heijtel (2017). To this end, a simplified version of the original approach was used (de Waal et al. 2022) to make it more manageable and accessible for organizations to use. This simplified approach was used as the framework to arrange the interventions the case company, which we followed over a period of 5 years, applied during its successful transformation to an HPO. The framework made it possible to make a structured overview of the interventions which makes it clear how the case company went about the transformation, and to distill the core elements of the approach the case company used. These elements are worthwhile for other organizations embarking on an HPO transformation, to evaluate whether their planned interventions cover the core elements enough, so that they too can be successful. Therefore, we can conclude that the aim we had with our research has been fulfilled, i.e., we were able to show that the de Waal and Heijtel (2017) HPO transformation approach, albeit in a simplified form, is an addition to both the HPO literature and to organizations as a relatively easy-to-use technique to help them transform to an HPO. Thus, our research has both theoretical and practical contributions. Theoretical, we have extended the currently rather limited academic literature on transformation approaches regarding high-performance organizations with another validated case, thus helping this line of research further along. Practically, organizations cannot only develop more trust in the additional validated transformation approach of de Waal and Heijtel (2017) but also know that this approach has become easier to apply, thereby increasing their changes on a successful HPO transformation.

Limitations and future research

One of the limitation of our research is that the qualitative part relied heavily on the input of a selected group of people of CoIA: the HPO Coaches and the manager of CoIA. Involving a wider group of CoIA employees might have yielded different views and opinions. Future case study research into HPO transformations should extend the research population for interviews. A second limitation is that, although this was a longitudinal study, the time frame of the study could have been extended, specifically to evaluate whether CoIA was able to keep hold of the HPO status and what the organization did in order to achieve this. It is important to be careful with generalizing these research results as just one case has been added to the research covering the de Waal

and Heijtel (2017) transformation approach. Two cases in general is not enough yet to state that the researched phenomenon, in this case a transformation approach, could be valid in multiple settings (Md. Ali and Yusof 2011). Future research should, therefore, endeavor to extend the number of cases using this particular transformation approach and should also increase “the pool” of different organizations from different sizes and operating in different sectors—especially the non-profit and governmental sectors—to evaluate whether the HPO transformation approach manages to hold up after even more research. Another interesting avenue of research is to collect the findings from multiple applications of the HPO transformation approach, to evaluate whether certain interventions are more successful than others and whether they are useful in general.

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