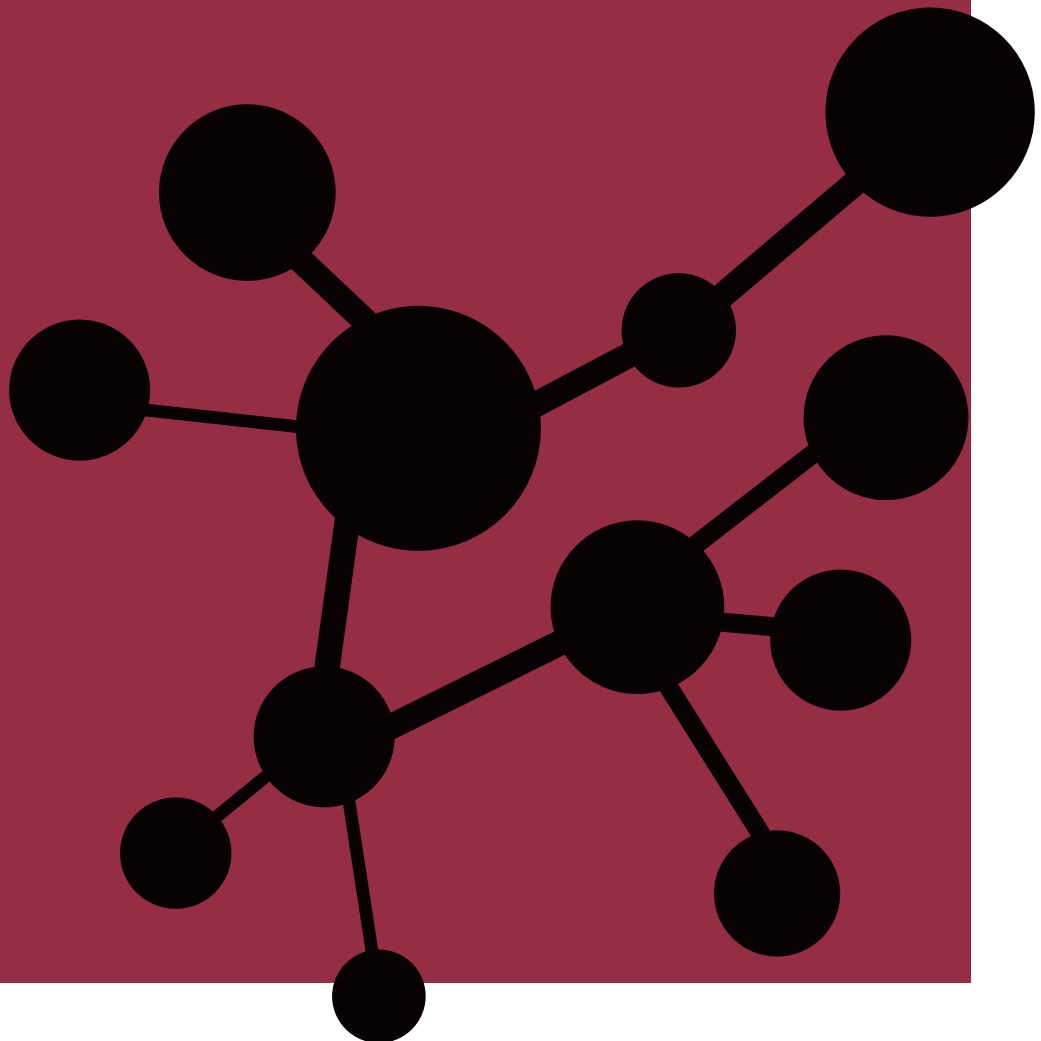


HOW COLLABORATION WINS

Leadership, Benefits, and Best Practices



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More than a touchstone for today's economy, the Era of Collaboration offers tantalizing benefits for any organization: A more engaged workforce, greater productivity, and a better customer experience all await those who promote internal and external cooperation. The trend toward collaborative work is now so firmly established that organizations failing to prioritize the practice risk falling behind their competition in the fast-paced, ever-changing 21st century.

These are among the key findings of a Harvard Business Review Analytic Services survey of leaders representing organizations that operate from locally to worldwide. The 491 respondents ranged from CEOs and other front-office executives to mid-level managers and their workforce kin. More than half of the respondents were from international companies or those with more than 5,000 employees.

The trend toward collaboration has intensified in the past decade, with sophisticated advances in cooperative technology, organizational culture, management style, and even workspace design. In the survey, respondents from organizations prioritizing collaboration were more likely to be growing faster or marching ahead of their competitors than companies whose leaders didn't favor the practice. Yet even those who said their employers didn't prioritize collaboration agreed on one conclusion from the research: While collaborative best practices are important for today's world of work, they will become essential in the coming three years.

Despite such universal endorsement and documented benefits, the survey disclosed that significant obstacles to collaboration success persist—directly in the polished glow of C-suite desks. Not only did the study identify cultural issues such as siloed decision making and risk aversity as the top barriers, but also that the next biggest obstacles were managerial fears about loss of control and a lack of a clear vision from corporate leadership. If an organization wants the full, real benefits of collaboration, the research shows that business leaders are the ones who can most likely make it happen.

HIGHLIGHTS

—
81%

OF RESPONDENTS IN THE SURVEY SAID INTERNAL/EXTERNAL COLLABORATION WAS IMPORTANT TO THEIR COMPANY'S CURRENT SUCCESS.

—
71%

SAID THEIR ORGANIZATION'S LEADERSHIP OFFERED SOMEWHAT HIGH TO VERY HIGH PRIORITY TO COLLABORATION.

Broad Support, Broad Benefits

Given worldwide attention to the need for collaboration, perhaps one surprise from the research is that 27% of respondents reported that their leaders felt neutral or placed low priority on fostering a collaborative culture. As that number indicates, the stronger trend was in favor of a cooperative workplace: A full 71% said their organization's leadership offered somewhat high to very high priority to collaboration.

More than that, a significant 81% of all respondents said internal/external collaboration was important to their company's current success. When asked about the importance of collaboration in three years' time, the "very important" group stretched to 91%, with another 8% describing future collaboration as "somewhat important." That endorsement of the growing connection between collaboration and success left only 1% of respondents (a lonely five out of nearly 500) who consider collaboration unimportant or who didn't know enough to provide an answer. If you don't think collaboration is vital, the survey indicates you simply are wrong.

"It should be common sense," said Jacob Morgan, author of *The*

Collaborative Organization and, most recently, *The Employee Experience Advantage*. "When you collaborate with others and you think outside your little mental box, you start to see benefits."

The reasons to support collaboration are clear to the survey's respondents. Organizations reporting 10% growth or more in the past two years were more likely to give high priority to collaboration compared with those who were neutral or gave low priority, 45% to 32%, respectively. The value of collaboration was even more pronounced when linking prioritization of collaboration to whether an organization felt ahead of its competition. Sixty-eight percent of those prioritizing collaboration said they were ahead of competitors, compared with only 40% of those who felt neutral or gave collaboration low priority. [FIGURE 1](#)

Asked to list specific outcomes from collaboration, organizations most often reported, in this order: improved customer experience, more engaged workforce, higher productivity, and greater efficiency. Close behind on the list of benefits were improvements in organizational excellence, plus faster, more agile decisions and product development.

Best Practices

Collaboration can be both internal and external, with a range of tools and techniques. The research clearly identified the most necessary ingredients for collaboration success: senior management support *and* participation. Those two factors received the strongest endorsement among other collaborative practices, with the difference between them equally revealing: Management participation was valued a full 11 percentage points higher (64%) than simple management support (53%). That finding presents a startling lesson for organizations that want to move from laggards to leaders: To earn the benefits of collaboration, managers not only must talk it up but also walk the walk.

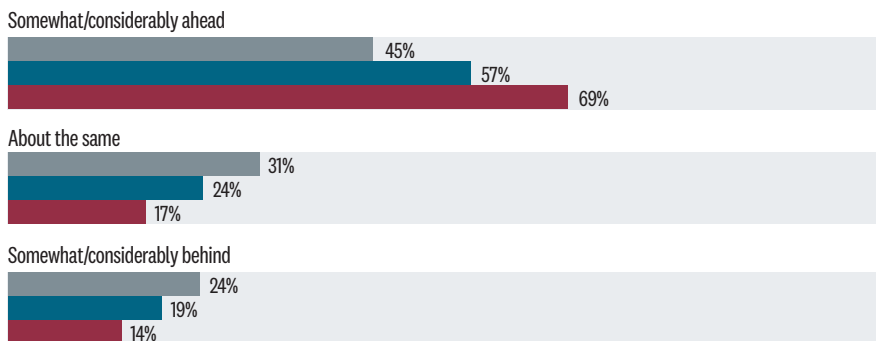
FIGURE 1

PRIORITY ON COLLABORATION

Organizations that place a high priority on collaboration fare better than their competitors do.

What level of priority does your organization's leaders place on fostering a culture of collaboration? How would you compare your organization's market position to your competitors?

● NEUTRAL ● SOMEWHAT HIGH ● VERY HIGH



SOURCE: HARVARD BUSINESS REVIEW ANALYTIC SERVICES SURVEY, SEPTEMBER 2017

Morgan, head of The Future Organization, said corporate leaders must work openly to create a culture for collaboration.

“Collaboration can only exist in an environment where people feel safe,” he said. “If you don’t have an organization where people feel the ability to be vulnerable, to be empathetic, to be themselves, then you are not going to have collaboration.” And best practices? To Morgan, they are “all of the above ... you have to have the physical space that supports it, a culture that encourages it, the tools that enable it. It’s not just one thing you can do.”

Other best practices from the survey provide a road map for any organization that wants to become more collaborative. First, the culture must allow decision-making input from the workforce, with a flatter, more open organizational structure. Second, a collaborative organization must promote interaction among departments, enabled by state-of-the-art communication and document sharing and remote access to information and each other.

David Coleman, author of *42 Rules for Successful Collaboration* and an upcoming book about the future of collaboration, agreed that leaders spur collaboration. “I have run into a few CEOs who are enlightened enough to realize that they are responsible not only for the company but also for the company’s culture and the way people interact with each other and the way people collaborate with each other,” said Coleman, founder and managing director of Collaborative Strategies in San Mateo, California. “Often, it’s their behavioral examples that everyone follows.”

Expand Your Toolbox

The advent of collaboration coincides with the digital revolution: Workers collaborate more because they have the tools to do so. Technology such as document sharing or videoconferencing have allowed internal and external cooperation to grow, fueling a synergistic revolution.



“IF YOU DON’T HAVE AN ORGANIZATION WHERE PEOPLE FEEL THE ABILITY TO BE VULNERABLE, TO BE EMPATHETIC, TO BE THEMSELVES, THEN YOU ARE NOT GOING TO HAVE COLLABORATION.” JACOB MORGAN, HEAD OF THE FUTURE ORGANIZATION

Certainly, IT managers have struggled to keep up with quickly evolving cloud-based tools that allow group interaction among workers, partners, and even customers. The most supported tool, this research showed, was no revelation: the ever-present email and calendaring. Beyond that is a more revealing lesson for those shopping for collaboration technologies: With tech tools, the cafeteria approach seems best. Statistically, remote access tools were used for cooperative interaction as much as that ancient device, the telephone. Nearly equally used were messaging/chat, document sharing, and video or web conferencing. Many of the favored tools are linked today to cloud systems. [FIGURE 2](#)

Coleman, whose research and expertise includes collaborative technology, added a warning though: Too many versions or brands of the same technology—say, six different videoconference systems in a large corporation—can be a training and utilization nightmare. Tools also can be too complex, requiring too many clicks, or they can be designed more for IT programmers than for the people IT serves. “My big rule is that if a tool gets in the way of interaction, it’s not a good collaborative tool,” Coleman said.

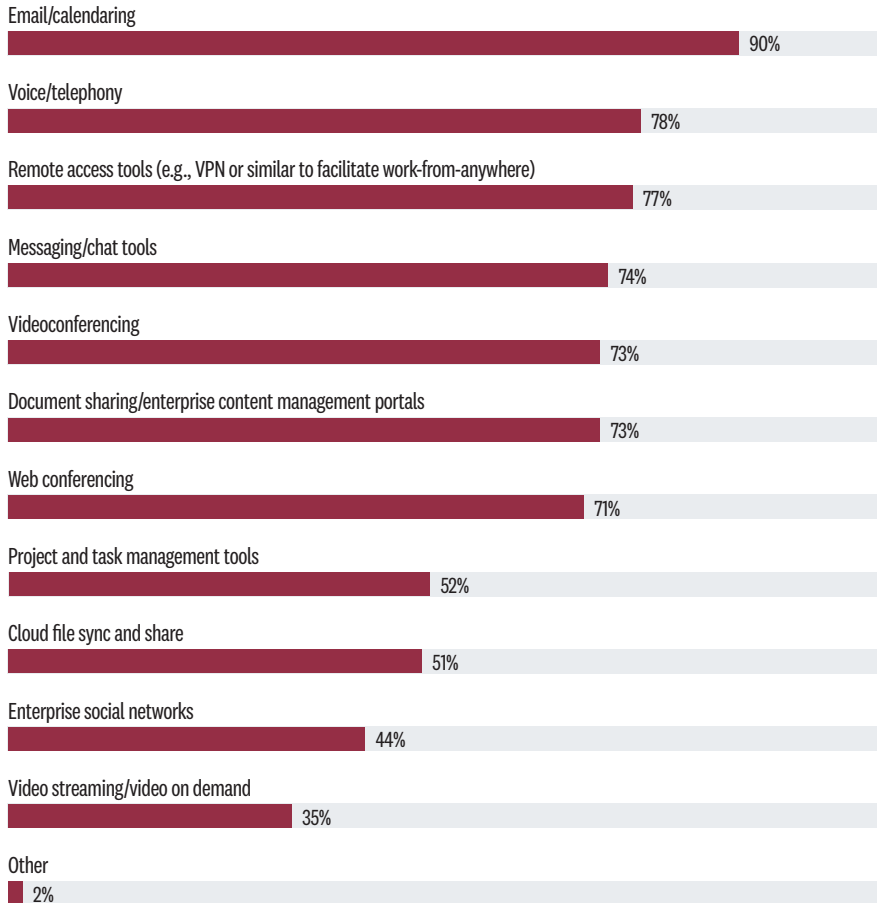
When the survey asked respondents to identify the top barriers to increased collaboration, technology was just not a problem. The lack of the right tools or even cybersecurity risks from increasing access and sharing were

FIGURE 2

TECHNOLOGY TOOLSHED

Collaboration technologies currently in use.

Which of the following collaboration technologies are currently in use at your organization? [SELECT ALL THAT APPLY]



SOURCE: HARVARD BUSINESS REVIEW ANALYTIC SERVICES SURVEY, SEPTEMBER 2017

not significant roadblocks, the survey showed. In fact, the usability of digital tools was the least important barrier, compared with all other possible obstacles on the survey list.

This support for technology was just as strong when respondents rated the level of protection they felt from any cybersecurity risks associated with collaboration. A strong 82% reported they felt moderately to very significantly well-protected from hackers who might attack because of collaboration tools. Only 9% felt slightly or not at all well-protected. Given the constant onslaught of corporate and public-sector hacking, is that confidence misplaced?

Coleman sees cyber risks as inherent to the digital age and not especially related directly to collaboration tools. “Security is an illusion,” he said. “You are asked to weigh the value of security and the value of collaboration, but that’s an impossible question to answer. You need both.”

Obstacles Remain

Remember those 27% of the survey’s respondents who said their organization’s leaders gave low priority or were neutral about collaboration, even when nearly all respondents agreed the practice was becoming required? Any organization wondering whether the responsibility for collaboration success lies firmly in the laps of leadership should consider these additional findings:

- Of the top barriers to successful collaboration, the top four were in the realm of leadership and the style it creates: siloed structures/lack of cooperation across departments, a risk-averse attitude, fear of loss of management control, and no clear vision from management. [FIGURE 3](#)
- And when more than three-quarters of the 491 respondents took the time to write in “one thing that would improve collaboration in your organization,” the two most frequent themes by far were leadership and organizational culture.

For a collaborative culture, “you need to start from the top,” said Coleman. “A lot of people at the bottom have already done some of these changes, and they are being held back by those at the top who aren’t changing.”

This focus on the role of top managers in the survey, when analyzed by corporate rank of the respondents, was fascinating: The higher-ranked respondents seemed to support the concept of collaboration as much or even more than lower-level managers did. But when it came time to assess the actual collaborative efforts in the C-suite, the trend was for mid- to lower-level managers to be more critical of CEOs and their corner office partners. Some leaders may talk a good collaborative game, but they need to reevaluate their ability to implement.

Both Morgan and Coleman believe leaders can change their conduct and thus an entire organization’s culture. And both said the key was a new kind of manager.

Resistance to collaboration occurs, Coleman says, “because people in power don’t want to give up their power. As far as I am concerned, the good leader today, a good CEO today, is more of a mentor than a general. They are there as an enabler, to help people do great things.”

Morgan presents a similar definition of the Collaborator in Chief that organizations need: “One of the ways that companies can measure a great manager is by how many people they helped make more successful than themselves at the organization. That will drive collaboration like you can’t believe.”

This image, of course, conflicts with the historical elements of traditional leadership and organizational culture. Leaders make decisions and employees follow them; silos exist to manage and operate, usually from the top down; et cetera. But that traditional industrial manager is so half-century ago, Coleman observed. “Those kinds of structures work well in a

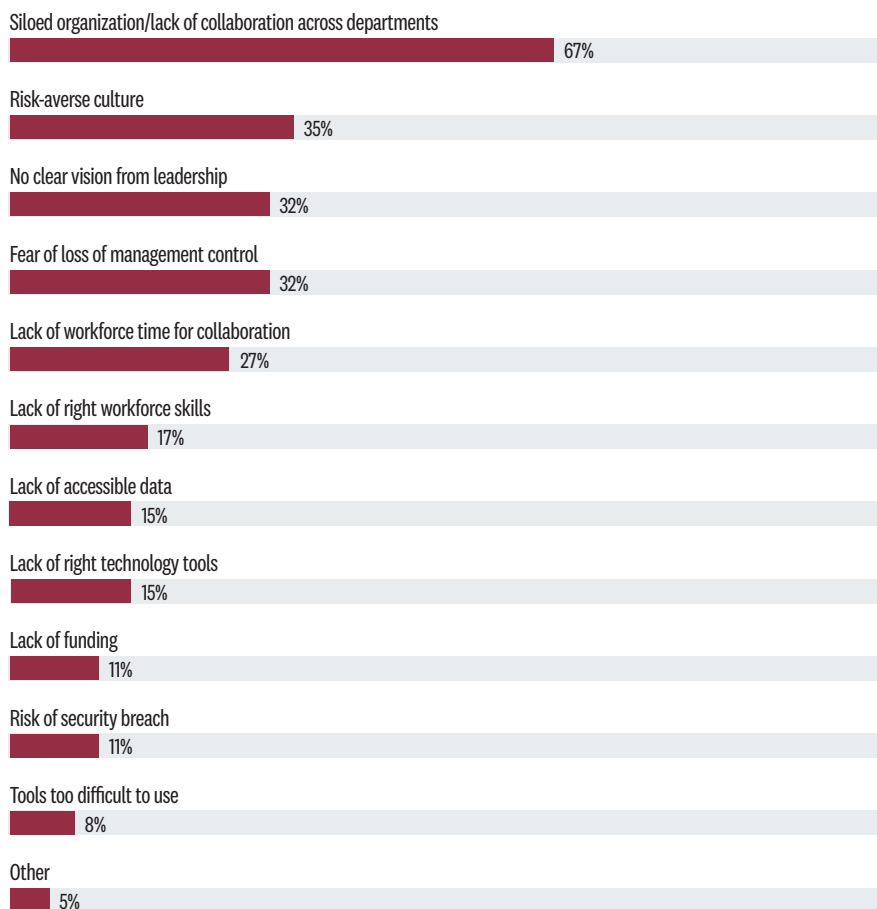
“One of the ways that companies can measure a great manager is by how many people they helped make more successful than themselves at the organization,” says Morgan.

FIGURE 3

COLLABORATION OBSTACLES

Top barriers to successful collaboration.

What are the top barriers to successful collaboration in your organization? [SELECT UP TO THREE]



SOURCE: HARVARD BUSINESS REVIEW ANALYTIC SERVICES SURVEY, SEPTEMBER 2017



THE SURVEY IDENTIFIED LACK OF WORKFORCE TIME FOR COLLABORATION AS THE MOST IMPORTANT OBSTACLE BEYOND WORKPLACE CULTURE AND MANAGEMENT, WITH 27% LISTING IT AS AMONG THE TOP THREE BARRIERS.

stable environment,” he said. “But I don’t think we have been in a stable environment for twenty years ... As far as I can tell, change is accelerating.”

Most corporate leaders today will recognize this environment. The top five drivers for increased collaboration, according to the survey respondents, were changing business models, evolving customer expectations, the fast pace of business, a more dispersed workforce, and the simple competitive benefits that collaboration could bring. Less important but still relevant reasons to promote collaboration were a younger, more tech-savvy workforce and a greater reliance on external partners.

The Time Barrier

In the survey, the barriers to successful collaboration beyond management and culture were seen as less important: lack of workforce skills, the right technology, risk of a security breach, and lack of accessible data. However, the research disclosed one exception to this finding: employee time.

In fact, the survey identified lack of workforce time for collaboration as the most important obstacle beyond workplace culture and management, with 27% listing it as among the top three barriers. This relatively

high ranking confirms conclusions in previous surveys. Simply put, employees and partners in today’s pressure-cooker workplace believe they have trouble finding the time for what some see as the clock-devouring chores of sharing information, discussing options, and generally being a cooperative team member.

Coleman said fears about overwork could be offset by increased productivity from collaboration. In effect, cooperative practices could alleviate increases in workload. Coleman also believes in collaborative leverage, where organizations can identify specific changes in processes that can be given tangible values, instead of focusing on the intangibles of collaborative behavior.

The survey found no great trend toward hiring younger workers from the digital generation. Rather, the preferred talent management strategy to promote cooperative work was to train existing workers and hire new workers. Morgan points out that businesses have dealt with multigenerational workforces “forever.” Companies should embrace the benefits of that trait, rather than worrying about whether one generation is better at something than another, he said.

The Future of Collaboration

Many studies over two decades have elaborated on the major elements of collaboration: open management style, collaborative technologies, supportive cultures, and a workplace design that integrates them all. But the HBR Analytic Services survey hints that specific subparts of those elements may be underused or not as deeply understood. These more detailed techniques could line the pathway for companies that want to sharpen collaboration skills.

For instance, the survey showed that an open workspace design and specific policies to promote collaboration were less common in today's collaboration success than management or overall corporate culture. One specific technique—the use of worker perks or incentives to reward collaboration— attracted only 9% of respondents when they were asked to list the top five collaboration ingredients. The lesson: After an organization embeds a collaborative culture and management, the options of perks, design, and policy may allow avenues for increased benefits.

Coleman and Morgan agreed that the future of collaboration remains tied to technology. Both predict that AI (artificial intelligence) will change in leaps and bounds the workforce, workplace, and even the way of work.

“We’re moving into an era where collaboration is not just human-to-human but human-to-machine collaboration and machine-to-machine collaboration,” predicted Coleman.

In the end, Coleman and Morgan support the overall message of the research: Organizations that don't adopt collaborative methods will succeed “less and less,” Coleman said. “It’s not like all of this will die out at one time, like the dinosaurs. It will happen over time, and there will be a leading edge and a trailing edge.” And collaboration will win.

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KEY FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

GETTING AHEAD WITH COLLABORATION

- 1** Organizations that collaborate internally and externally not only are rewarded with greater productivity and a more engaged workforce, but collaboration also may be the key to actual survival as the economy swiftly evolves.
- 2** Collaboration succeeds though a range of technology tools instead of only one or two glitzy gizmos. That means videoconferencing, document sharing, remote access, and project management systems along with email and phones. Avoid too many versions of the same tool, though.
- 3** Top managers are the most important forces in promoting collaboration. They must support the concept, model good collaboration, and transform organizational cultures from silos to engagement.
- 4** To begin or boost the benefits of collaboration, organizations should look deeply into best practices, including adopting some that may not yet be as widespread: workforce incentives, careful workplace design, or specific, formal policies that promote the practice.

METHODOLOGY AND PARTICIPANT PROFILE

A total of 491 respondents drawn from the *Harvard Business Review* audience of readers (magazine/newsletter readers, customers, HBR.org users) completed the survey.

SIZE OF ORGANIZATION

ALL RESPONDENTS' ORGANIZATIONS HAD 100 EMPLOYEES OR MORE.

52%

5,000 OR MORE
EMPLOYEES

28%

1,000-4,999
EMPLOYEES

20%

100-999
EMPLOYEES

SENIORITY

16%

EXECUTIVE
MANAGEMENT OR
BOARD MEMBERS

45%

SENIOR
MANAGEMENT

30%

MIDDLE
MANAGEMENT

9%

OTHER
GRADES

JOB FUNCTION

18%

GENERAL/EXECUTIVE
MANAGEMENT

13%

SALES/BUSINESS
DEVELOPMENT OR MARKETING/
COMMUNICATION ROLES

9%

HR/TRAINING AND IT

6% OR LESS

OTHER
FUNCTIONS

REGIONS

54%

NORTH AMERICA

25%

EMEA

15%

ASIA/PACIFIC

6%

REST OF WORLD



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