



## **Blend of Sciences Will Maximize Productivity**

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Workforce productivity—the value produced per unit of human effort—is a leading indicator of business success. Increased workforce productivity is the overall goal of most new technology, yet most companies don't maximize productivity gains. Even professionally implemented reengineering efforts leave money on the table.

Process reengineering initiatives apply new technology to streamline operations and improve customer service and efficiency. Substantial gains in productivity are realized through technology-enabled workflows that remove functional barriers and shift work from manual tasks to knowledge- and service-based roles. However, process reengineering initiatives don't fully tap into the full extent of productivity improvement available.

When knowledge and service work requiring discretion replaces machine-like manual tasks, this new work becomes inherently more complex and relies more on human performance and broader forms of management support. Unlike discretion in task work, which is discouraged because of the unwanted variability it creates, discretion and variability are the means by which knowledge and service workers create value.

To capitalize on this untapped potential, management must turn to the many disciplines of science that hold the truths about how people best learn and work—sociology, psychology, biology, education, and all of the management science disciplines. The challenge is accessing this knowledge through a single new discipline of applied science—increasingly referred to as human-performance technology, or simply humaneering—that consolidates the more relevant knowledge and integrates it for more convenient application in the workplace.

The experience of a major telco illustrates the potential. This past year, a division's call centers were faced with problems ranging from high turnover and absenteeism to employee dissatisfaction and low levels of customer satisfaction. An analysis of its operations revealed that new employees were unreasonably challenged to perform their customer service function using the company's out-of-date information systems. A close review of the six weeks of traditional classroom instruction showed that few new hires learned much during that time and, for most, the learning didn't begin in earnest until they were placed in their new roles. The challenge was particularly overwhelming for new service representatives, who had to pick up what they needed to know about the company's products, services, information system, policies, and procedures through trial and error alone.

Discouragement was leading to poor attitudes and absenteeism, resulting in disciplinary problems and eventually to voluntary and involuntary terminations. All the while, many customers were receiving unacceptable service at the hands of these unprepared service representatives. Together, these problems were generating excessive costs greater than \$8 million per year, or better than 25 percent of the operating budget. Despite this substantial recurring cost, management felt that solving these problems with an investment in a new accounting system, graphic interface, and computer telephony integration technology couldn't be justified due to the sure disruption of company operations during substantial merger integration and because the division would soon become obsolete due to lessening market demand for its products and services. Division management needed a strategy that could improve workforce performance and productivity within its existing information and telephone technology.

The call centers launched an organization-focused strategy. The company contracted for the redesign of the division's complex information systems, and its learning and its management support, using advanced science-based and operations-proven methods that made learning and working much simpler for employees to master. Within four months, it reduced new-hire training to two weeks of class time, with graduation performance and productivity levels exceeding job standards. It halved turnover. Customer satisfaction rose dramatically, and employee satisfaction throughout the operation improved substantially.

Essentially, management designed and implemented a high-performance work system that more effectively supported the current information and telephone technology. It focused on maximizing value for the customer and then aligned all of the other operational and organizational elements to optimize human work performance and productivity. The recurring annual savings is estimated to exceed \$6 million.

With this insight, organizations should rethink their approaches to reengineering initiatives. As managers recognize the potential to squeeze additional productivity from currently installed technology and extend the productivity gains of proposed new technology, the bottom-line promise of technology becomes even clearer and more attractive.

We approach a future that will require the achievement of maximum results from people, and this achievement will happen only if we find ways to maximize the productivity gains from investments in technology.