

Human Performance Consulting: Transforming Human Potential into Productive Business Performance

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Introduction

The industry principles that more than a century ago defined the work roles of most people as little more than replaceable parts have now themselves been replaced.

This remarkable change resulted largely from the continuous automation of manual work and the inexhaustible rise of consumerism. These two forces, more than any others, have propelled a continuous shift to knowledge- and service-based work—now the role of more than 80 percent of workforces in developed economies.

Distinguished from production and logistics work, which involves people supporting machine systems that make and move products, knowledge and service work is performed by people and only supported by machines. For knowledge and service work, people themselves are the principal “means of production” and therefore the source of enterprise performance.

Today’s conventional knowledge about organizational performance has its roots in dated industrial-age thinking and experience that no longer characterize much of today’s workplace. As a result, the human resource, training, organization development, and other professionals on whom executives and managers rely for organizational expertise are under pressure to find more-successful methods to cultivate this new kind of human potential and create ever-more-productive business performance. The negative effects on human performance of using industrial methods for organizing, managing, and trying to improve knowledge and service workers may have been a cost that businesses once could bear, but they cannot bear it for much longer.

This book describes the role of new specialists within organizations—human performance consultants. Implemented as a strategy driven by executives and managers, and equipped with new knowledge and methods, this new role is highly effective in meeting the challenge to improve the performance and productivity of knowledge and service workers.

Why a new role? Because this new challenge is far more complex than the challenge previously faced by organization support functions. And because the methods for meeting this new challenge are far more sophisticated than the industrial methods that organizations have grown accustomed to using to improve performance workers. It is no longer enough to just give people training and rewards and expect them to perform. This approach doesn’t work with knowledge and service workers, and in fact, it can even have a negative effect on their performance.

When workforce managers look to their staff professionals to effect human performance improvements, they should expect systematic, comprehensive, and precise solutions and not the one-size-fits-all remedies of years past. Today’s ready access to knowledge has made it possible for all staff work to be truly professional and fully responsive to its unique challenge. With the assistance of these new internal specialists, managers can expect knowledge and service work that is designed and continuously improved to achieve the highest possible levels of performance—the kind of performance improvement that generates financial value.

One of my goals for this book is to provide staff professionals from human resources, training, organization development, and other organization-support functions with new perspective for their

work. Because knowledge disciplines tend to be self-referring and insulated from one another, the improvement of human performance has been attempted in ways that are strikingly different, if only because such efforts are based on incomplete ideas. To support an expanded viewpoint and facilitate even-more-productive work, this book bridges these disciplines to provide a comprehensive framework for designing high-performance work, diagnosing performance problems, and creating skillful performance-improving initiatives for today's postindustrial organizations.

With the goal of widening the dialogue concerning methods for improving human work performance, I purposely avoid some potentially obscure language with which these concepts are often presented in professional journals. I also try whenever possible to point out possible connections between disciplines so the reader can consider new linkages to the knowledge with which other practitioners work. As a result, the book is largely inclusive rather than exclusive relative to knowledge that has proven itself useful in this work. But although the potential frame of reference has been widened, the size limitations of the book require that the breadth and depth of knowledge that is presented must be limited to that which has particular significance.

Among several innovations presented in this book are select insights from a 15-year transdisciplinary, open-source research effort to compile the scientific code on human and organizational performance. This material directs consultants not to just engineer work designs, but to "humaner" them when work performance relies on high levels of human performance, which is generally the case with knowledge and service work. This approach may well become a principal methodology by which all human performance consultants work in the future.

Additionally, readers will gain insight into the real impact that knowledge and service workers can have on business performance, and they will learn how to transform this potential into high-performance human work that creates financial value-added (not just "soft" benefits). They will also learn why human performance consultants are an essential instrument for future enterprise success and how staff professionals can work in new ways to fulfill this important new role.

This book is written for a transdisciplinary audience, including people who are interested in improving human performance at work but have found it difficult, and those who may consider themselves very knowledgeable about human performance from the perspective of their own disciplines but are interested in finding out about other approaches that have proven helpful. Approaching this challenge with the ultimate goal of bridging disciplines for more-effective transformation of human potential into productive business performance, practitioners will do well to see this book as the beginning of, not an end to, a much greater understanding of the factors and forces that contribute to human work performance.

The text is organized around three themes, each consisting of chapters that expand on key issues. The early chapters outline new opportunities within organizations that were born of new developments in science, the economy, the nature of human work, the role of managers, and business strategy. Their impact is substantial, creating new opportunities for all organization-support professionals while placing additional demands on their work.

The second theme focuses on insights into human work performance that provide a needed framework for better understanding the complexities of its improvement. Specific strategies are discussed that apply this new thinking to the challenges that performance improvement practitioners routinely face.

Finally, I address the vital emerging role of human performance consultants as instruments of performance improvement. They have become an essential resource to executives and managers serious about capitalizing on the substantial untapped potential for improving human performance and productivity. Methods that have proven effective for implementing the support of internal human performance consultants are outlined, along with the rationale for their effectiveness.

This book is a beginning. It is consistent with my earlier book, *Future Training* (1995), which I wrote to help lead the transition of traditional training departments to more performance-oriented support functions. In this book, I will now focus all organization-support functions that are in search of greater effectiveness on the important new potential (and challenge) in organizations—improving the performance and productivity of today's postindustrial workforce, which is composed primarily of knowledge and service workers.

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