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Serious Performance Consulting: According to Rummler

Geary A. Rummler

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by Paul Harmon

Geary Rummler is one of a handful of people who laid the foundations for what, today, we think of as the business process movement. Others include Edwards Deming, Joseph Juran, Michael Porter, Michael Hammer, James Champy, and Thomas Davenport.

Each of these gurus has focused on a different part of the process picture. Deming and Juran focused on quality, Porter focused on strategy, and Hammer, Champy and Davenport focused on how to use IT to redesign processes. Rummler focused on a methodology for improving performance. Specifically, he focused on the alignment between organizations, business processes and the people who manage and perform activities.

Rummler started out at the University of Michigan, focusing on new technologies that would improve human performance. But, here, let him describe the trajectory of his career:

"We ...started in the field of training (before it became human resource development). Like many other people in our position, we were quick to realize that training is only one variable that affects human performance. During the late 1960's and early 1970's, we began learning about the environment and managerial variables that influence performance. We then turned our attention to the impact of organization strategy on performance. During the 1980's, we developed a technology for documenting, improving, and managing the business processes that bridge the gap between organization strategy and the individual... With the evolution of Process Management, and more recently, of 'managing organizations as systems,' we believe we have a comprehensive approach that addresses the major variables in the system that influence the quality, quantity, and cost of performance."

Throughout the 70's and 80's, Rummler also had a major impact on ISPI (The International Society for Performance Improvement) and ASTD (The American Society for Training and Development) and helped move both organizations toward a greater emphasis on improving organizational performance.

The quotation above is taken from the preface to *Improving Performance: How to Manage the White Space on the Organization Chart*, a book Rummler coauthored with Alan Brache in 1990. *Improving Performance* introduced Rummler's three levels of performance, which include:

- *The organization level:* the performance desired of the institution
- *The process level:* the performance required of all processes in order to achieve the organization-level performance
- *The job level:* the performance required of all jobs in order to achieve the process-level performance

Improving Performance provided a systematic methodology for defining performance goals for all levels, for analyzing and aligning activities at all levels, and



for identifying problems and effecting solutions when gaps or deficiencies were present.

By 1990, when *Improving Performance* was published, Rummler's approach, which is usually called the Rummler-Brache methodology, after the company he and Alan Brache formed, was becoming more broadly appreciated. In the early Eighties, for example, Rummler had done significant consulting in Motorola. In the mid-Eighties, when Motorola began to formalize the ideas that have since become Six Sigma, they wedded many of Rummler's process and performance concepts with statistical concepts derived from the Quality Control movement. Summarizing this, Bill Wiggenhorn, the president of Motorola University and the corporate VP of training and education at Motorola at the time, said: "Rummler and Brache present concepts and tools that are being used successfully throughout Motorola worldwide. Their ideas for managing the white space played a key role in Motorola's attack on quality."

Similarly, researchers at IBM's Toronto Labs developed a methodology to apply Rummler's concepts to process analysis that was done in conjunction with software development and called the resulting extension of Rummler-Brache, LOVEM. (Rummler introduced the idea of swimlanes as a way of quickly determining which functional units or managers were responsible for which subprocesses or activities. In a classic Rummler process diagram, which flows from left to right, the customer is always assigned the top swimlane so that, with a glance, one could see all of the flows between the organization and the customer. IBM named its approach "Line of Vision - Enterprise Mapping" to indicate that by having the customer on the top line, one had a vision of how the enterprise interfaced with the customer. One way to track the spread of Rummler's influence is to observe the spread of the swimlane concept to the various business process notations.)

The influence that Rummler had in the Eighties was nothing, however, compared with his impact in the Nineties. In the early Nineties, Hammer, Champy and Davenport kicked off Business Process Reengineering (BPR). The thrust of BPR was that new IT techniques were available that would allow companies to radically improve the way business processes performed. Too often in the past, Hammer proclaimed, companies had used IT to simply automate existing, poorly conceived processes. Now, using the latest techniques, he proposed that companies should start from scratch, and reconceive their basic value chains to make the incredibly more productive. While Hammer proved excellent at generating enthusiasm for his proposals, he didn't offer a method for actually carrying out his prescription. When companies looked around for someone who could tell them exactly how to do performance design, many discovered *Improving Performance* and Rummler-Brache. In the mid-Nineties, the Rummler-Brache methodology was probably the most popular general approach to organization analysis and process analysis and redesign among business people. Proforma's ProVision modeling software tool, still one of the most popular modeling products, was launched at this time and specifically designed to support the Rummler-Brache methodology. Although ProVision has evolved, it is still known among business analysts as a powerful and easy to use tool, and this largely reflects its origins in Rummler's well thought out, wholistic approach to performance improvement.



As the Nineties waned and the emphasis shifted to workflow software, packaged applications and Y2K, Rummler and Brache sold their company and "retired." In fact, however, once his non-compete agreement had run its course, Rummler set up Performance Design Lab (PDL), www.performancedesignlab.com, and began to offer new courses that described his latest thinking about how to improve business performance. Those who have stayed in touch with Rummler know that he's done a lot of exciting work in the last few years. For one thing, he's refined his way of characterizing business into four viewpoints that emphasize the Business Systems view, the Organization Systems view, the Management Systems View, and the Performer View. In each area Rummler has refined previous insights and techniques to create a more efficient methodology. Unfortunately, while he was doing this, Rummler has written little and appeared at few conferences, so much of his latest work is unknown to the broader business process community.

That is why his new book, *Serious Performance Consulting: According to Rummler* is so welcome and so important. This is not a book that simply summarizes his recent work, however. It is an integrated, systematic presentation of Rummler's approach to performance improvement, organized around a consulting project, with a week-by-week timeline, from project initiation to final recommendations. Along the way Rummler introduces concepts and principles, and a running commentary for new performance analysts in boxed asides, entitled "According to Rummler." He follows up the case study by providing specific advice for someone who wants to become a performance analyst.

I know of nothing like this book in terms of its comprehensiveness or its systematic presentation. This book would be just as valuable for a Six Sigma practitioner as for a corporate line manager. It will be just as useful in aiding IT and business analysts as it will as a guide to a new business manager that wants an overview of what's involved in managing an organization to achieve results. The hallmarks of Rummler are all here. There is system and simplicity. One moves smoothly through an explanation of just what a business is all about, what the key levers are that a manager can control, and what techniques are available to change their current situation into something that will produce better results. There is little in the way of jargon or technical language in this book beyond the language that every business person must master to understand how a business operates. Rummler shows his readers how a business is really a system for producing results and then goes on to show how one can influence the performance of that system. Along the way you learn about management and measures, about business processes and the kinds of problems that bedevil them, and about how to understand the people and the jobs that actually produce results.

If there is a fault with Rummler's approach, it is, perhaps, that he doesn't say enough about the role of IT systems and how they are best used and integrated with human performers to maximize the work of an organization, but most IT analysts will have no problem seeing how their systems replace the jobs that Rummler treats and must, ultimately, deliver the same results as people did when the tasks were done manually.



If you can only buy and read one book on management, or on performance improvement, or on business process analysis and design, or on how to deal with employees this year, make it *Serious Performance Consulting*. If you are just beginning, it will give you an invaluable overview. If you have been doing it for decades, this book will recall you to first principles and remind you of how all the pieces must fit together to truly improve the way your organization does business.

Serious Performance Consulting is available from Amazon and other book stores, but you'll get it faster if you go directly to www.ispi.org and buy it directly from their bookstore.

