



A Manager's Guide to Improving Workplace Performance

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Reviewed by Paul Harmon

There are many different communities interested in analyzing and improving business processes. Even within the human resources community, there are different communities. The American Society for Training and Development (ASTD), for example, focuses on training development, but has a subsection that is actively interested in process and human performance improvement. Similarly, there is the Organizational Development community, the Knowledge Management community and the Business Transformation community. One of the most interesting and active communities resides within the International Society for Performance Improvement (ISPI).

ISPI was founded in the Sixties by psychologists who were interested in applying the principles of behavioral psychology to education and training problems. In the course of the years it has lost most of its focus on education and broadened its approach to training problems. There were a number of individuals who pushed ISPI in this direction, but the best known is Geary Rummler, whose book, co-authored with Alan Brache in the late Eighties, *Improving Performance*, pulled together a number of threads into a comprehensive vision of what is now generally known as Human Performance Technology (HPT). HPT is now applied both in Business Process Reengineering and Business Process Management. HPT is ultimately based on systems analysis rather than performance analysis. HPT begins with a focus on organizational performance. It looks at what the organization is trying to achieve. Then it looks at the processes and the management practices that organize how work gets done within the organization. Finally it looks at the people who perform the jobs that accomplish the work. In its current version, HPT has expanded to incorporate the software systems that support employees, but it has never focused on software automation – it has always maintained its focus on the people that make up the organization.

Today, ISPI is an active society that provides a base for a wide variety of practitioners who seek to apply HPT in a variety of different contexts. Some still focus on analyzing and designing educational programs. Many still develop or deliver training in organizations throughout the world. Some are very focused on organizational change, and many function as human performance consultants and assist companies that are trying to analyze enterprise and business process problems. If they have a bias, it is that they tend to focus on analyzing and improving the way people work together to achieve organizational goals. Indeed, following the approach laid out by Rummler and Brache in *Improving Performance*, ISPI members have a whole collection of analytic techniques and improvement practices designed to deal with the commonly encountered human performance problems organizations face. It's interesting to note that many of the major corporate sponsors of ISPI are the large software companies that are especially concerned with creating processes that are heavily dependent on human performance.

Since "performance" is a word that carries a number of different connotations in current business parlance, it is worthwhile to point out some of them to avoid confusion. A quick review of the literature reveals several books that use the word "performance," in their titles including: *Key Performance Indicators*, *Five Key Principles of Corporate Performance Management*, and *The*

Performance Management Revolution. All of these books emerge from the corporate management and financial communities and focus on measurements of organizational performance. Most are concerned with performance measures and metrics that are derived from departmental units rather than processes and all are abstracted from a concern for how one actually accomplishes work. Similarly, there is the Business Performance Management Forum and a magazine on *Business Performance Management* that both focus on automating performance measurement. The BPM Forum, for example, is an association of vendors who work to promote the use of business intelligence (BI) and analytic techniques – usually to drive the software used for executive dashboard displays.

Roger Chevalier has worked in the field of Human Performance Technology for 30 years. For the last several years, until 2006, he was the Director of Certification for the ISPI. *Improving Workplace Performance* is very much in the tradition of Geary Rummler and the human performance tradition. The table of contents provides a nice overview of the scope of the book:

Section 1. Developing a Team

1. The Manager as Coach
2. The Manager as Leader
3. The Manager as Councilor
4. Motivating Your Players
5. Developing Teamwork

Section 2. Identifying and Removing Barriers to Performance

6. Define the Performance Gap
7. Identifying the Causes of Performance Problems
8. A Performance-Assessment Case Study
9. Selecting the Best Solutions
10. Managing Change
11. Evaluating the Results of Performance-Improvement Initiatives
12. The Manager as Change Agent: A Case Study

Section 3. Synergy

13. Using All the Tools

Clearly, this book is addressed to an operational or middle manager who must lead employees or manage a team. It considers the various roles that a manager can play and offers advice and describes best practices in each area.

The second section of the book shifts and presents a very user friendly version of HPT. In essence, it provides a working manager with the core concepts and some practical advice on how to analyze human performance problems and discusses best practices a manager can use to alleviate some of them.

This is not a book for a serious human performance analyst or for anyone interested in analyzing business process problems. For someone who wants a detailed, analytic approach, we would recommend Rummler and Brache's *Improving Performance*.

Improving Workplace Performance is a book for a business manager who wants to improve his or her ability to deal with employees' problems. It provides a good introduction to the kinds of problems a manager will often encounter, provides some analytic techniques that can help sort

them out, and some practices that will help the manager organize, monitor and control the employees or team they have been asked to lead.

Given the modest price, this book could easily serve as a textbook for company courses designed to provide managers with better employee management skills. It's a quick read, and it would certainly provide the average manager with a good deal of useful insights into the nature of management and human performance.

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