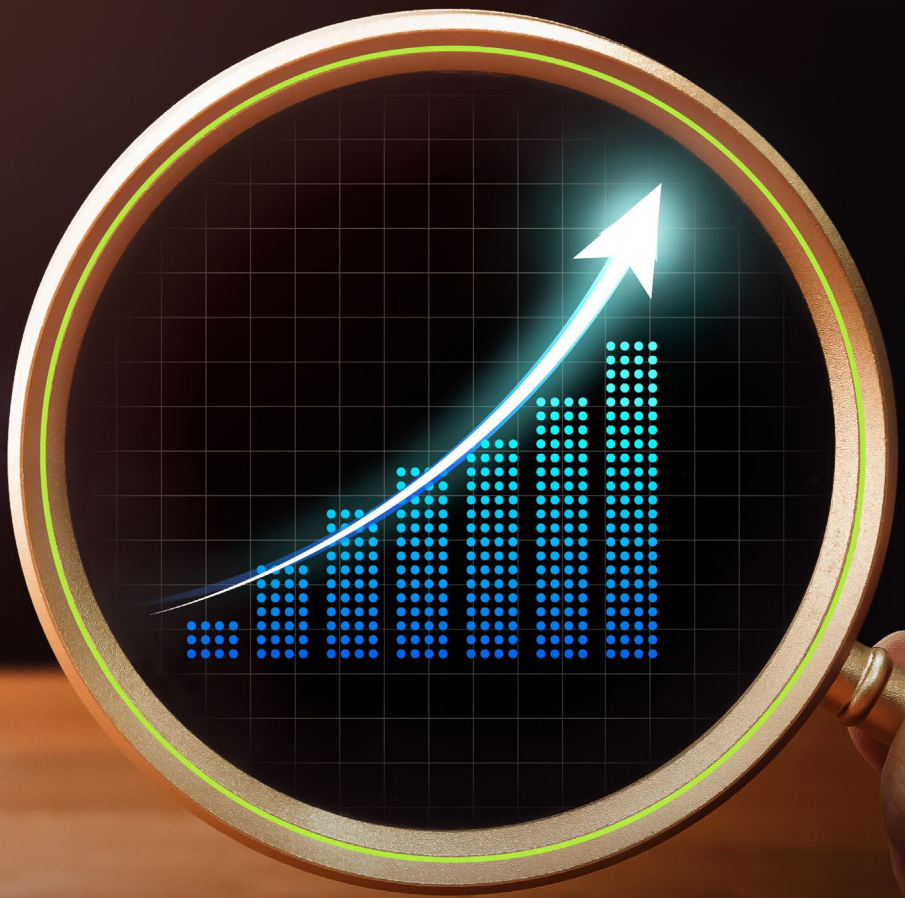
eBook

UPSIDE LEARNING

Rethinking Learning

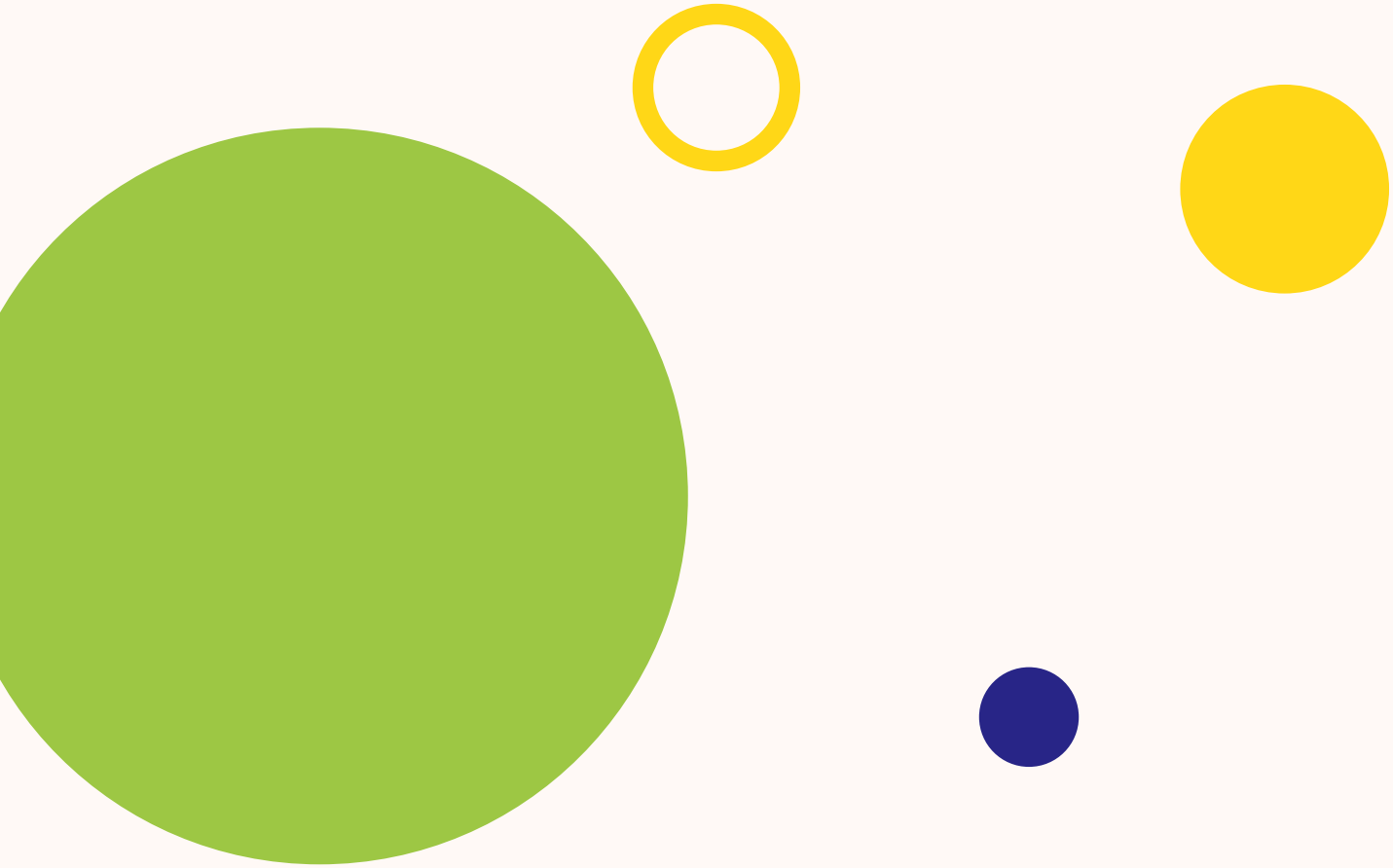
FOCUS ON PERFORMANCE



INTRODUCTION

In a previous eBook, we talked about 'impact', with learning & development units (L&D) doing things that create measurable changes in the organization. And, we strongly believe in it! However, while that's an approach you can take, there's another way to think that complements, and makes more pervasive, the underlying focus.

In this eBook, we're going to look at thinking from a 'performance' perspective. Here, we'll argue that it's valuable ***and*** doable. You'll see that it encompasses three major steps, that mirror but don't replicate, the steps we advocated for impact. We hope you find this informative and inspiring. More importantly, we hope this is a perspective you will adopt and thereby improve what we do and how we do it.



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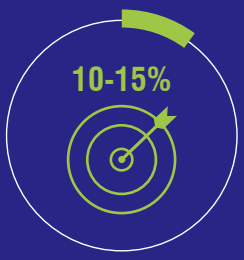
WHAT IS PERFORMANCE?

The first question to be answered is to identify just what we're talking about. Why can't we just talk about learning? There are some fundamental reasons we should consider thinking about performance instead of just learning.

At the core, our outcomes, our ***impact***, doesn't come from learning. We achieve outcomes based upon learning new skills, yes, but they have to be the right ones, developed appropriately, and refined until they're having the needed outcomes. Learning is a part of the process, not the end goal in and of itself.

To put it another way, we could create experiences that achieve learning outcomes, yet aren't of value to the organization. There are a variety of ways we could go wrong. We could be making sure people know information that isn't critical to their jobs, or that doesn't get even thought about, let alone applied, when it's relevant. Which all too often characterizes where our organizations go wrong. **Estimates suggest that only 10-15% of our training investments have a real impact. Turned around, that suggests that we're wasting 85-90% of our money!**



How do we remedy this? It comes from thinking differently about what we're here for. We need a 'performance' perspective.

Performance (not learning)

So, what ***is*** a performance perspective? Quite simply, it's looking to improve performance in the organization. Let's be clear, that's not learning, except as a means to an end. Also, not our only means! The full spectrum of ways to support outcomes depends on the barriers to performing. Some of them are addressable by L&D, and others are not. For instance, if people can do it, but aren't, the problem likely isn't one that skills training ***can*** solve. Similarly, there are times such as when things don't happen very frequently that don't make sense to train and can instead be better served by instructions available as needed. And more.

Too often, what L&D has focused on is 'learning'. We provide onboarding, compliance training, and meet demands for courses on sales, operations, leadership, and more. The focus can be that folks have the experience, like it, or even pass a knowledge test at the end of it. L&D regularly takes content (PPTs and PDFs), digests and presents it, and sometimes adds a quiz to test whether the knowledge has been acquired.

However, that approach is problematic. Subject matter experts don't have access to roughly 70% of what they do. They have access to what they know, on the other hand. Thus, courses can become information dumps, which can provide the appearance of learning, but not actually achieve it. There's reliable evidence that "telling' isn't training", as it's become known. In cognitive science, it's referred to as 'inert knowledge'; accessible but unlikely to be activated and applied when useful.

Thus, focusing on learning can lead us astray. Our organizations need people able to do things that need to be done. That's the real goal; obtaining the outcomes needed. To put it another way, we need people to perform organizational tasks, not just learn them. When we look at it that way, we should see that a focus on outcomes, on performance, is what we need. Then we have to think about what that means we do differently.

Implications

What ***does*** this mean we do differently? We need to put a performance focus across our activities. That means we think about performance in our processes. What does that mean?

We need to ensure that we're looking for the needed changes. We need to analyze why we're not achieving the outcomes we need. Then we need to identify the barriers that are preventing that success. We next need to look at what changes can remedy the situation, and implement them. Finally, we need to see whether our changes have solved the problem. Or not.

Note that this can work for new areas to be addressed. If you've new skills necessary for a new process or service, or to accommodate new industry trends, you can determine what the performance should be. Then you can state a baseline of zero. You are using a performance perspective that actually tightens up your skilling, too.

This shouldn't sound new or controversial. This is what we've always supposed to have been doing, it's just that we're too frequently not taking this approach. As such, it's worth elaborating on what and why performance is important.

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WHAT IS **INVOLVED IN PROPERLY DOING PERFORMANCE?**

So, what do we need to be doing to have a performance focus?
The first thing, of course, is to move away from the belief that our purpose is learning. That's a means to an end, not an end in itself. Instead, we need to recognize that our goal is to ensure that the organization's performance is at the level necessary. This includes both the execution of things that are known to be needed, ***and*** a continual innovation that drives adaptation to changing circumstances. Those two elements are worth digging into further.

The Known

For most organizations, there are the things they know they need to do. This includes the most common business operations: marketing, sales, operations, legal, human resources, etc. This is pretty much regardless of the industry. The known also includes the specifics of the particular business. That might be service offerings, or the products to be developed and delivered.

What's important here are the levels of performance. Is marketing hitting it's targets? Are sales meeting their quotas? Are employees engaged and scrutable? Also, are we delivering our specific solutions with sufficient quality? Typically, in any organization, there are key performance indicators (KPIs) or objectives and key results (OKRs) that are the current focus. This is because they're not sufficient.

What's important is for L&D to be looking to impact the ones that aren't at a sufficient level. That is, that area is underperforming. Then we need to identify why, and provide an appropriate intervention. The reason why necessarily suggests the type of intervention necessary. For instance, if people ***are*** capable, but aren't performing, there's likely a reason that training won't solve!

Importantly there are ***two*** levers in the L&D toolbox. Most people are familiar with the first, courses. Of course, doing courses ***right*** is an issue. Too frequently, the methods employed, owing to reasons like budget or lack of measurement, aren't appropriate. The other tool is performance support. Here we're talking job aids of a variety of sorts: checklists, look-up tables, procedure guides, wizards, etc. They're frequently a better solution than a course, but they're underutilized.

The Unknown

The other area is the continual exploration of new business opportunities. It's been a mantra for a number of years that the rate of change is increasing. New factors can create both opportunities ***and*** threats, such as the response to the pandemic, or generative artificial intelligence. Organizations need to be agile! While the innovation generally happens in domain-specific areas, there are better and worse ways to be innovative. While this can fall to other units in the organization, there's a case to be made for L&D to take the reins.

Innovation is about learning. That is, when you're doing research, troubleshooting, design, etc., you don't know the answer when you start. Research results in findings, trouble-shooting results in identifying problems, design results in new solutions, and so on. You're literally learning the answers from your actions; you're learning! Thus, innovation properly belongs to those who understand facilitating learning. Which ***should*** be us!

Thus, facilitating learning about how to do innovation right, even facilitating innovation, is a natural area for L&D to also support performance. It may use the same tools, but it's a new and underexplored area.

One other brief mention is that, rightly, L&D should have ownership of these aspects before taking them to the rest of the organization. That is, L&D should be able to successfully perform innovation, working out loud, collaboration, experimentation, and the like before facilitating that for the rest of the organization. We need to own it before we promote it!

Steps Forward

The question then becomes, what do you concretely ***do*** to have a performance focus. We suggest that there are four major components. When we were talking about impact, we similarly talked about three of these areas, but a performance focus requires adding in one more.

To execute from a performance perspective, the first step is to properly analyze the existing performance. What should the performance level be? And, what would people be doing to achieve that metric?

Then, we move on to design. There are two aspects here to mirror our two levers. One is designing learning to support performance. The other is job-aid design, where we design tools for performers to use to achieve the necessary outcomes.

Finally, we'll need to evaluate performance. This means doing more than seeing if people liked it, or could perform on a test afterward. Instead, we have to see if our performance interventions are being manifested in the workplace, and are leading to changes in the metrics.

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PERFORMANCE-FOCUSED ANALYSIS

To begin a performance perspective, you need a performance-focused analysis. That is, you need to analyze the needs from a goal of achieving necessary performance. Here, we're drawing from the field of Performance Improvement, and specifically Performance Consulting. Typically, that means you start with a performance gap, an area where you know performance isn't what it could and should be. Then, you need to understand what barriers are preventing the performance. Once that's understood, you can move on to identify the necessary interventions. That also includes determining what's within L&D's purview, and what instead is someone else's problem.

For the interventions, you should determine what the resulting change should be, and as a result how your performance metric will change. That implies a necessary first step, identifying what the performance gap is.

Gap Analysis

Gap analysis is the process of targeting a specific performance need. We look at the gaps in performance between what would be desired and what it currently is. It's also about drilling down from vagaries to specifics. If someone says that they need a sales course, you need to drill down more. Is it the time to close? The success rate? Customer satisfaction. You want to identify any and all gaps.

Gap analysis starts with identifying the core tasks. What are the performers doing, and what should they be doing? It may be that what they're doing doesn't match what they should, or they are doing what they're supposed to be, but that turns out not to be sufficient. Expert performers can be useful here to identify what the performance should look like. Supervisors may be useful here as well to identify what people aren't doing.

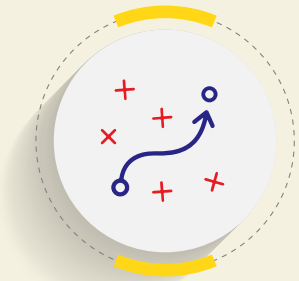
Each gap should be identified with a metric. The question to ask is: how will you know when performance has reached the necessary level? If you haven't identified an outcome, you really can't determine that you've solved it, and then can't claim any efficacy about your interventions. While ideally, it's a core metric such as sales closures or manufacturing errors, it can be subjective such as the customer's or supervisor's opinions.

Thus, you should identify the tasks that are to be performed, and to what level. Then you can see to what level they're being performed now (including zero). This gives you a gap in performance. Next, you need a reason for this performance not to be adequate for now.

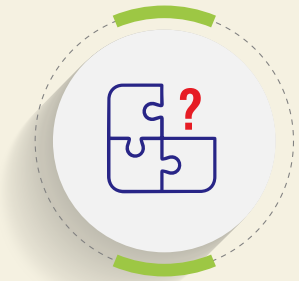
Root Cause Analysis

For new skills, the rationale is easy, learners don't know how to do what they need to do. For other situations, however, there may be more than one reason. If someone, or a team, can't perform, we can see a variety of potential sources, for instance:

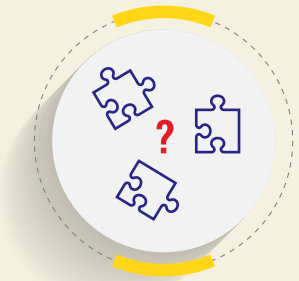
They could not have sufficient materials



Their reward systems or beliefs may be pointed to another approach



They don't know what to do



They don't know how to do it

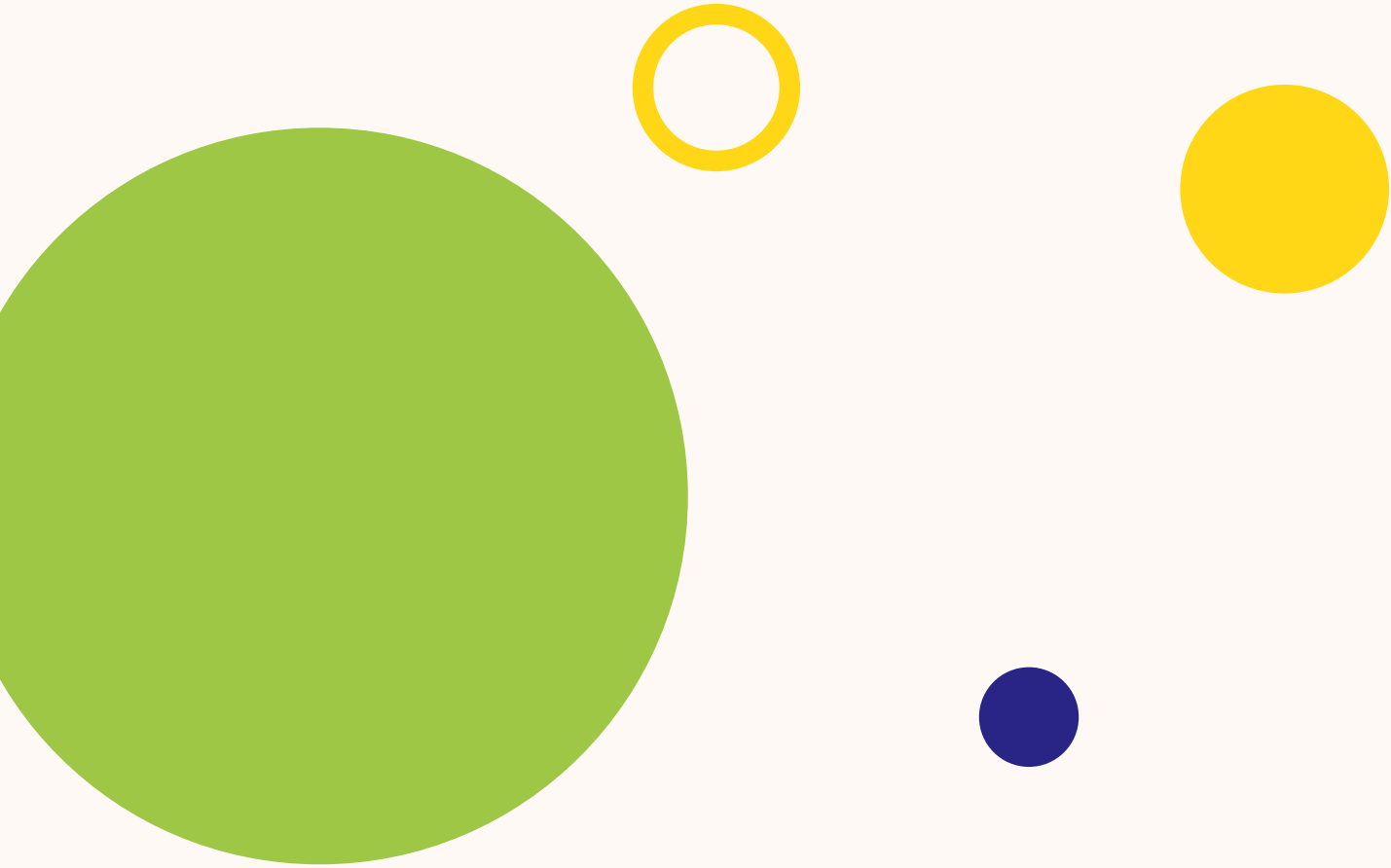
Some of these may have multiple causes as well. If they don't know how to do it, for instance, it may be that they were taught a different way, or it was so long ago they've forgotten, or their boss insists on a different approach. Also, not all of these are amenable to training. Moreover, some may be better served by other approaches, such as performance support.

The important point is to recognize what the barrier is. In Guy Wallace's ***The L&D Pivot Point***, he cites examples where this analysis indicates the organization needs to do something else first, then come back to the problem. For instance, they may need to rearrange work premises, access more resources, or change incentives. When it is a knowledge or skill task, he then talks about whether to invest in learning or performance support, or both.

There are situations where learning is the right solution, such as when a new skill is needed. Others, however, are where putting information into the world makes more sense, for instance, if something is done so infrequently that learning is likely to be extinguished, but it matters if it's done right. Another time is when there's too much information, or it's changing too fast. Our cognitive architecture, despite the obvious power, has limitations. We've developed solutions for them of various sorts, but we need to match the solution to the specific need.

Looking at the actual performance is an important step. For one, you can see how they perform, and ideally, you can also see how exemplary performers work. Another important element is the tools they use. Are they optimized? Another question is whether they are working around a bad process or situation. From interface design, for instance, we learn that post-it's on monitors are clues that there's an inherent problem. They may have solved it (so bake that into your solution), or they're working around a problem that shouldn't be there.

Then, there are times when we need both job aids ***and*** some formal learning to go along with it. That, in fact, is likely to be the case in more situations than we think; the ideal performance will frequently be how people perform ***with*** cognitive tools. Here, you should develop the tool first (if it's not already part of your work environment), and then the training to incorporate the tool.



Interventions & Targets

Once you know what your intervention is, you need to execute it. That is, you need to stipulate how the performance outcome is going to be addressed, and what level it needs to be at. You're not down when you've identified the intervention, you also need to ascertain the level of behavior that will be sufficient evidence. Mager defines a performance objective as being comprised of three parts:

1. *The actual behavior itself, well defined in terms of the necessary performance*
2. *The conditions under which it is appropriate, the context*
3. *The criteria which are used to determine success, or not*

One of the best heuristics I've heard to define the necessary performance is whether it is ***observable***, that is, that the outcome should be something tangible in action to our output. These criteria do not preclude either a job aid ***or*** training.

Again, interventions of training or job aids are within the area of responsibility of L&D.
Many business units may make their own job aids, but they benefit from a focus on performance. Also, consistency across such instruments is valuable. However, the most important aspect is that such aids are viewed in the context of successfully being used, and that likely includes training. Thus, while other areas can create tools, they should do it in conjunction with, if not actually delegating responsibility to, L&D.

Having identified the core problem and the intervention, then whether it's learning design or job aid design, it needs to be done ***right***.

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PERFORMANCE-FOCUSED JOB AID DESIGN

When the solution is either performance support alone or ***with*** training, that job aid design should be done first. This is because any training design that incorporates the job aid should be developed ***after*** the job aid is tested and working as appropriate.

The performance perspective says that we should make sure that folks have the resources to succeed. That includes our cognitive resources, and job aids provide this support. What job aids do is tap into 'distributed cognition', whereby our thinking isn't just in our heads, but is distributed around the world. As Ed Hutchins documented in his quite-academic book ***Cognition in the Wild***, we can distribute our thinking across tools ***and*** people. Which provides multiple benefits, including complementary strengths. While our minds are good at pattern-matching and meaning-making, we're bad at remembering rote and arbitrary information such as transport schedules, and similarly can't reliably execute steps repeatedly, such as tossing a coin error-free each time. Technology reflects the alternative, and a performance-perspective not only respects that, but leverages it.

Most job aid design isn't documented by academic research, but instead by the insight of talented performance consultants. Folks who formed the basis of the Performance Improvement movement, such as Geary, Rummler, Harless, and more, have posited the importance of such efforts. Less guidance exists about exactly how one ***does*** this design. Allison Rossett, along with Lisa Shacfer, and Bob Mosher & Conrad Gottfredson are two sets of authors who have focused on aspects of this approach.

Cognitive Gap

Rossett & Schafer posit two different types of aids, planners, and sidekicks. The distinction is between ones you use in the moment – sidekicks – and ones that are used before or after an event: planners. Both author pairs emphasize the process, focusing on being clear about the need.

Rossett & Schafer suggest three overarching categories of support: executing steps, making decisions, and accessing information. They then acknowledge how technology has complexified these categories. Gottfredson & Mosher go further, talking a bit about the core cognitive challenge. This is, we think, a useful approach. As previously mentioned, our cognitive architecture has limitations. We struggle with a variety of barriers, including limits to attention and working memory, struggling to remember steps or whether they've been performed, accurately capturing the full sweep of sensory data, accurate recall of arbitrary or large volumes of information, and more. Our solutions should reflect the particular source of the problem.

Appropriate Solution

Common solutions have emerged over time. We've used auditory and visual recording to capture what our senses can't accommodate. We've used calculators to reduce overhead in solving data problems. Checklists have been touted by no less than Atul Gawande as a tested solution for checking steps. Step-by-step guides have uses from assembling furniture to dealing with flight emergencies. And so on.

For one thing, don't reinvent the wheel unnecessarily. Look to examples for possible solutions. Unless this is a totally new situation, which is unlikely, someone's produced a solution you can plagiarize (as far as your lawyers will let you). One source may be the tools the performers have created themselves. They may require polish, but they might be a good foundation. The use of tools can indicate a situation that can be designed better to incorporate the tool, or to eliminate the need for one.

Creating usable tools requires paying attention to the details. In addition to the writing, which should be structured and simple, the visual design also needs to be considered. Not all job aids are visual, so if it's audio support (think of your GPS), considerations need to be made to vocal and signal perception and clarity. With digital support, tools can also be interactive, and so the design of the interaction also matters.

Iteration & Evaluation

One thing that both sets of authors, and good practice, dictate is that your first solution is unlikely to be ideal. Atul Gawande documented how much testing and refinement of his checklist was required to create the final version that achieved notable metrics. Particularly given the lack of specific categories and design approaches, and instead focusing on process, testing, and tuning are important components.

Here, as with learning design, we should have metrics we're iterating to achieve. The tool ultimately should improve performance, whether making things faster or more accurate, or whatever improvement you've determined. (A noted analysis of a proposed new phone system solution ultimately indicated that it would take longer than the existing approach!) There were performance metrics identified in the objectives that should be evaluated here as a basis for improving the design.

Methods from usability including protocol analysis (having folks verbalize while they perform to understand any cognitive barriers) are useful here. Choosing sample tasks that represent the necessary performance and analyzing steps taken can also be useful. Jakob Nielsen found that only a few users were necessary to find most problems. Iterating between expert review and user test has also been shown to be effective.

Even with the testing (which should be done with learning solutions as well, as we'll see), job aids typically are a less costly solution than training. Done properly, with appropriate roll-out and messaging, they put the information to succeed in the world, rather than in the head. They make sense where our cognitive gaps are likely to create issues. They should be your preferred solution, when possible.

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JOB AID DESIGN
CASE STUDY

Performance support via job aids means creating a resource people can use 'in the moment' to achieve outcomes that don't require learning. In this case, the client was looking to provide their employees with support after the days of the Covid-19 pandemic. They had a 'return to work' program that they were instituting, and wanted to make it a success.

Their goals were severalfold. They wanted to help people understand the new policies and procedures. Another issue was making sure folks weren't anxious but instead ready to follow the approach. They also wanted folks to be able to implement the policies and procedures appropriately. That latter was a natural situation for the use of job aids.

There were several components to the solution Upside Learning provided. The overarching program was one of messaging the processes, motivating them as well as developing capability. Content about the changes, informative and motivational, was one component. These were developed and delivered as small videos. Scenarios were a component for the capability. Here we detail the job aid component.

Process

Following a good job aid procedure, specific needs were evaluated. It was recognized that there was a considerable quantity of different points for each major category: being sick yourself, caring for others, and warning signs. Thus, a goal was to create a resource for each situation.

An important point is visual design. To properly convey the necessary information, it is necessary to have the elements aggregated yet individually perceptible. This was the case for each of the elements.

In this case, three situations were considered. One is how to deal with a sick person in your residence. The general quarantine recommendations were here about how to keep them from contaminating others. The second was how to care for oneself if infected, and this went into steps to take. The third covered what to check if something is wrong enough to access assistance.

Results

The actual implementation of the necessary policies were supported with job aids. Here, the goal was to make available a reference for the associated steps with each activity. So, for example, the first resource was how to care for others with active infections. It wasn't expected that individuals would remember the aspects, but instead be able to use the reference when appropriate. It included all the steps that should be considered.

A second aid was focused on caring for yourself (instead of others). Again, it consisted of a suite of considerations. A third was slightly different. Here, instead of considering how to take care of someone, instead it focused on possible signs of severe trouble in an infection. It again consisted of things to check, but includes a call to action if warning signs were observed.

Together, these three resources were considered material that client employees could access to stay safe from the effects of Covid. As part of the larger program, they provided quick access to information that may well have atrophied after presentation in other forms. It's an important backstop to the other elements.

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PERFORMANCE-FOCUSED LEARNING DESIGN

When job aids won't work, or have been designed but need training to incorporate them, we need learning design. However, the performance perspective says that we need to emphasize specific elements that might otherwise be missed. Too frequently, our learning perspective has focused on the knowledge, not the application. This isn't acceptable from a focus on organizational success. With the robust result that new information doesn't reliably lead to a change in behavior, we need to understand what does.

To successfully achieve learning – a persistent change in behavior in the same circumstances – we need to practice that new behavior in those circumstances. Research summarized in books like Ericsson & Pool's ***Peak*** or Brown, Roediger, & McDaniel's ***Make It Stick*** emphasizes the importance of retrieval practice, with specific constraints. Those constraints include spacing out the practice, with increasing challenge, variability in context and task, and more.

From Objectives to Practice

The core focus has to be on the performance as identified in the objectives. The analysis absolutely has to have yielded clear things people need to be able to ***do***, not just know. Then, the immediate next task is to design the final practice. That is, what would indicate a successful acquisition of the necessary learning? This is having them do in practice what they need to do in performance.

From that final practice, what needs to happen is to work backward, identifying necessary precursor practice. For any reasonably complex outcome, it is unlikely that learners will be able to perform successfully on this final task without preparation. If not, why bother with the learning?
This preparation includes scaffolded practice; practice simplified in a number of possible ways. That includes parts of the problem being performed, or simpler circumstances such as round numbers or a lack of complications.

The process works back until you get to the stage where learners start. Then you work forward, detailing the required practice. Practical constraints will guide how much practice is required, but the focus should be on achieving a minimal level of competence by the end of the learning intervention. Also consider explicitly how learners will continue to be developed, whether by extending the learning experience via technology, or on-the-job coaching, or both.

The constraints include a number of elements. For one, the level of difficulty should be pitched appropriately. Too simple is boring, and too complex is frustrating. Also, as learners develop, those levels increase. Spacing matters; it takes repeated efforts to improve, with sleep in between; just as you can't build muscle on one gym visit, you can't build substantial new skills in one day. Varying the context and task matters. The former supports the ability to transfer the skill, while the latter makes the predictability of the task less, which increases the likelihood of accessing it when needed after learning.

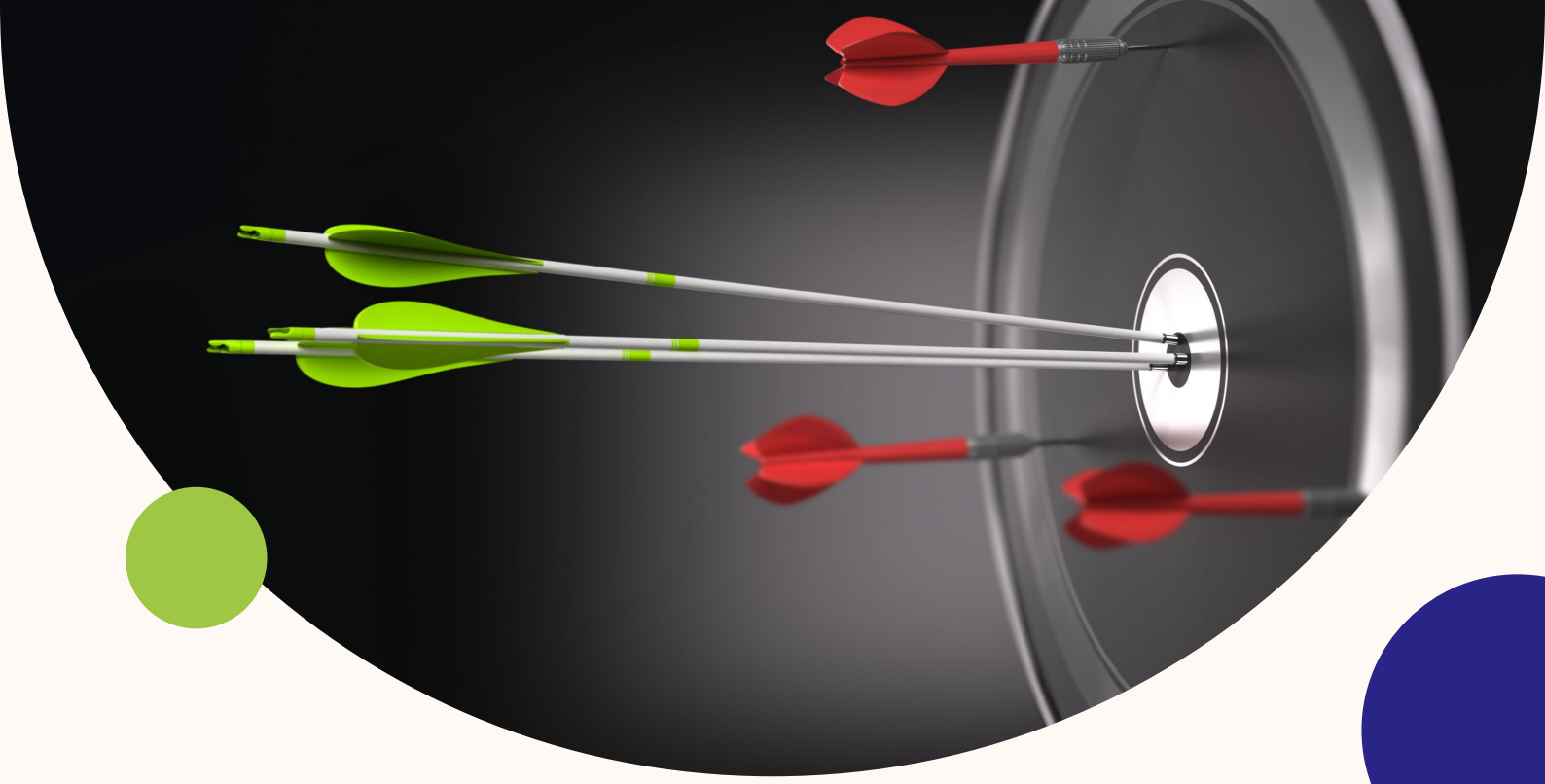
'Content'

With a suite of practice, the ***minimal*** amount of support content matters. Here, there are specific types of content that facilitate performance. This includes models, examples, and the emotional elements of learning.

For one, mental models about how the world works provide the basis for making good decisions in applying the knowledge to execute a task. There are (or should be) reasons ***why*** you do things a particular way, and explain why certain decisions are better than others.

The other important elements for learning are the selection, and proper execution, of examples. Examples should show how the mental models are used in different contexts. Research on cognitive load, such as that showcased in Clark, Nguyen, & Sweller's ***Efficiency in Learning***, shows that examples at the right time for the right learners can improve outcomes over just practice.

In addition to the cognitive elements, we also know that learning works best when learners understand why they should care, and that the experience is a safe place to learn. We need to help learners understand the What's In It For Me (WIIFM). We also want them to feel ok to experience the practice and make mistakes where it doesn't impact business outcomes.



Iteration & Evaluation

Julie Dirksen, in her most recent book ***Talk to the Elephant***, suggests a myriad of reasons people might not perform even ***after*** a course! This suggests that a learning design may or may not succeed. The way to ensure that it does, even following the best prescriptions, is to evaluate and refine.

Research principles provide a good first basis, but aren't likely to exactly address the particular performance circumstances you are needing to address. It should be understood by the design team as well as the stakeholders, that there should be some testing and tuning as part of the process.

Good practice increasingly suggests that the practice is the first focus of development and testing. Given the key role that critical practice plays in performance-focused learning, this is the most important thing to get right. Then, the associated content can be developed to facilitate success in the practice.

Ultimately, the analysis and design, together, create solutions that should address the performance problems.

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LEARNING DESIGN
CASE STUDY

Learning design for performance, while it shares the desired outcome of improved outcomes, differs in how solutions are designed. Here, instead of putting information into the world, we really do need to get people to perform differently. We have specific goals in mind.

In this case, an international airline needed to update their Fire Warden training to remote delivery for Covid-19. This had to be done ***without*** compromising the quality. This is a volunteer role, assisting folks in safety procedures in case of a fire. Critical decisions include recognizing safety hazards and supporting folks during an evacuation. As well, other employees had to be compliant with the Fire Warden instructions.

Process

A major issue was the time taken for the training, and looking for increased outcomes. Reducing the time, and/or increasing the effectiveness would be good outcomes. The desired solution would both be effective in creating improved outcomes, and decreasing the time taken.

To begin, the critical tasks needed to be identified. With the support of the client, specific decisions were identified that were desirable elements of success. These decisions needed to be embedded in realistic situations with plausible alternatives. Given the importance, it was desired that the skills be scaffolded from beginning to knowledge to competent decisions.

The solution was to implement those decisions in scenarios where there was a contextual setup, critical decisions, and consequences. Given the nature of the situation, the practice environments included time constraints. This was preceded by knowledge practice, and then context exploration, exploring four different environments.

With the clock ticking, individuals needed to make decisions under time constraints. The benefits of this were to provide sufficient practice whereby individuals perform under pressure.

Feedback came in the form of a score. The distractors in the scenarios were designed to be plausible situations, and feedback drove learners back to the content.

Results

The delivery of this solution resulted in several performance outcomes. Affected were training duration, improved emergency response time, and as an additional benefit, employee volunteering.

As intended, the duration was reduced by 32%. This result provided suitable improvements over the previous solution. In addition, emergency response times diminished. This outcome, not necessarily targeted, was an improvement as well.

An unintended outcome was that volunteering for the fire warden role increased. Twelve percent more folks volunteered to take on the role compared to before the training.

Overall, this solution achieved the intended changes in performance. Safety was increased, even with a reduction in the time taken to prepare.

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PERFORMANCE-FOCUSED EVALUATION

If our goal is to impact performance, how do we know we're having an impact? While there are a range of measures, the key is we do need to measure! We need data about what's happening, to determine whether our efforts have been sufficient or if more iterations of our design are needed. Thus, we need to evaluate what we're doing.

We also need to be mindful of a couple of things. For one, what type of data do we have access to, and what type of data will answer our questions. Then, we also need to know when we need to evaluate. We need evaluation at several stages of our process.

A critical way to think about it is what answers are needed. Do we need to know whether learners think the experience is good? Or do we need to verify that our interventions have remedied the problem? Matching the data collected to the questions that need to be answered is the best approach. Too often, organizations can collect data that they don't do anything with! Make sure that you do collect data, but know as ***priori*** what questions you're answering with it, and then do so.

Types

As indicated early on, we need data from our analysis. Specifically, we need to know what our performance ***should*** be, and what it currently is. Yet, there are several different types of data we can use. While performance ideally is focused on real organizational impact, at times the needed performance may just be whether it's good enough so they'll pay for it, or whether it leads to changes in the workplace, without evaluating the organizational metric. There are constraints within organizations that can preclude getting the desired data. We may have to adjust the data we ***can*** collect, though we should be as smart about that as we can.

Will Thalheimer, in his Learning Transfer Evaluation Model (LTEM; available online), expands upon the familiar levels from the Kirkpatrick model. His range goes from whether learners even attend, through asking learners and others what they think, to empirical measures. His eight levels range from several that are insufficient (e.g. learner opinions), through ones that are indicative (such as performance on knowledge tests), to ones that have some organizational validity (so, ascertaining whether they are performing the task). Clearly signaled is that indicators closer to the actual performance in the organization are better for performance.

Further, in his book ***Performance-Focused Learner Surveys***, he elaborates on how, even if you're just asking learner's opinions, there are better and worse ways to do it. In general, in research, there are hierarchies of data: independent objective measures are superior to subjective measures, which are superior to no data at all! Good experimental design about minimizing noise in the data while maximizing the representativeness and quality of the data, hold here.

Just as there are ways to take the same method and be smarter about using it (e.g. asking the right questions), there are also realities about just what we can collect. There are times when just improving learners' perceptions of a learning experience matters (particularly if you're charging them for it!). There are other times when you really need to see a change in organizational metrics such as costs or sales. Match your data collection to your situation and need.

Stages

Just as the type of questions you ask can matter, when you ask them also matters. As indicated when we talked about analysis, there are evaluation measures you need upfront, to design the solution. Then, there are ones that are used while developing the solution. Finally, there are the data that document the outcome.

At a formative stage, we may be asking detailed questions about the learning process. These questions can range from whether learners can successfully navigate the system (when using new or exotic solutions), whether they're enjoying the experience, and whether they're demonstrating a sufficient level of performance in the learning experience.

Such data collection is best done ***iteratively***. As mentioned in talking about design, you should expect to test and refine your solution. You should develop your practice first, and evaluate it, before moving on to 'content'. The data, as suggested, can cover several issues. You may need to adjust engagement, or learning outcome, both, or neither. Expect, however, to need to do ***some*** tuning.

You'll also likely test first the practice, then practice with content, and then the overall experience. Each time, you'll be testing for greater comprehensiveness of the solution. For performance-focused outcomes, we should be focusing on ensuring that each time we're making it more likely that the performance outcome we need will emerge.

Then, when our data says that our solution is working, we may (even 'should') want to document the outcome. This can be the same as the data saying that you're done, or you may look for a longer-term view.

Overall, from a performance perspective we should be measuring to see if we're achieving the outcome we're striving for.

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AVOIDING PERFORMANCE

"Hey, how's it going over in L&D?"

"Sigh, they're trying to make us something we're not."

"What're you talking about?"

"Suddenly they want us to be about 'performance', as if that's something we want to do."

"It ***sounds*** like a good thing…"

"Sure, it ***sounds*** like it, but there are lots of reasons to stay away!"

"Really, like what?"

"First of all, what does it mean? We're about learning!"

"Aren't you about learning to ***get something done***?"

"Now don't ***you*** start!
No, we provide the learning people need.
What they ***ask*** for."

"You're saying they know what they really need?"

"Well, no. But that doesn't matter! We give them the courses they ask for."

"How do you know if the courses are working?"

"There you go again. It's not our problem! It's up to them to ask for the right course, and give us access to the right content."

"Content? I thought that acquiring new skills requires practice."

"That's expensive! We can't be designing simulations and the like. And, we're really good at taking what they give us in PDFs and PPTs, boiling it down, and adding a quiz. That's what they expect."

"So, that's what you give them."

"Right."

"What if the problem isn't something a course can fix, like insufficient resources?"

"Then they shouldn't have asked us for a course."

"You're a service, not a solution."

"Er, what? Yeah. I guess."

"Aren't you worried that eventually someone's going to be looking to see whether the investment in learning is paying off?"

"If I thought they would look, I'd be worried."

"I reckon that's coming, actually!"

"Na – na – na, I'm not listening."

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PERFORMANCE AS **ECOSYSTEM**

When you start thinking from a performance perspective, you also end up thinking about the resources needed for performers to succeed.
This means that you need to think about more than meeting novice needs, or practitioner needs, but also the progression from novice, through practitioner, ***to*** expert.

Similarly, you want to be thinking about technology as an enabler. As we suggested earlier, technology is the complement to our brains. What it does well, and what we do well, aren't the same. We're good at meaning-making, while technology is good at rote. Put them together, and the whole is greater than the sum of the parts. So, we should be looking to ***augment*** our thinking for the optimum performance, not depending on just either what's in our heads or in the world, but instead how to create the combination that leads to the best outcomes.

The Transition to Expertise

Courses make sense for novices; they don't know what they need, nor why it's important. However, once they start becoming familiar, with becoming a practitioner, they start knowing what they ***need*** and why it's important, and they just need it. They need access to resources, not courses.

They also start needing to be communicating with others in ways that are more informal. They should be getting coaching to continue their development, someone who occasionally or regularly sees their work and can start giving more challenging assignments and, importantly, feedback.

Another component is exposure to ideas that aren't just internal. There is a suite of activities that help learners develop. For one, they can go online and find information. They can join societies, attend conferences and webinars, read articles, newsletters, and books. They can even start presenting and writing. This may seem out of the actual task, but the time spent reflecting and improving demonstrably pays off in both more engaged learners ***and*** better outcomes.

Some will advance to become experts, through expanding their understanding about the task. At this point, they start providing support for others. However, they now need interaction with other experts. The creative friction generated when experts interact is what leads to new ideas.

Technology as Enabler

Technology is an enabler for much of this. Resources can be made available through a portal and the broader internet. Interactions can be facilitated through social media tools. Making an environment that facilitates learners at all stages of their development becomes an overarching focus from a performance perspective.

A caveat here: no one all-singing, all-dancing, platform is likely to be the best solution for all the ideals. Yes, if you're in a small organization, you may not be able to integrate a suite of 'best of' tools. Yet, ideally, you work with your information technology (IT) group to create a coherent digital environment not just for working, but for learning as well.

Many times, L&D (and others) find working with IT to be difficult. Yet, they also get upset when the network goes down. ***That*** is what IT's worried about. Yet they also know they have to make a successful digital ecosystem. Finding ways to work with them that respects their concerns about security and reliability, and also reflects your knowledge of what's needed, should be the path to success.

There are numerous reasons, however, to not tie yourself to one platform. For one, the individual capabilities other than the core one are unlikely to be as good as what you could get with a separate solution. Also, being locked in makes it hard to switch when a better solution emerges. Even a small IT department should be able to tie together disparate tools. It's also important to use the enterprise tools, not learning-specific ones. As learners progress, doing so through the platform infrastructure reduces redundancies and brings solutions to where the performers already are.

Culture

There's a long-standing rubric that putting a social media platform into an organization that isn't psychologically safe will result in an unused system. This suggests two things: one is that you can reliably use this as an indicator of your company culture. The other is that you ***should*** make it 'safe'.

Garvin, Edmondson, & Gino wrote an article that documented the dimensions of a learning organization, in an evaluation checklist template. Those dimensions help document a target where organizations will continue to innovate and thrive because folks are feeling empowered to learn and improve. You won't get the full benefit of an ecosystem approach without creating an environment where people freely contribute to one another's and the organization's success.

There's a lot involved in switching to a performance ecosystem, but the potential benefits suggest it's the right long-term goal.

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PERFORMANCE AS **STRATEGY**

A performance perspective is a great place to start, but getting to a performance ecosystem environment doesn't happen overnight. As with many substantive shifts, it takes the elements of change: a vision, a plan, implementation, adaptability, and persistence. In short, it's an organizational change requiring a strategy. It may start in L&D, but it ultimately needs to be more broadly supported by the various stakeholders.

The vision is pretty clear: it's about focusing on the outcomes. That is, what is wanted is to assess performance and improve where it's needed. That means looking at the core tasks, identifying gaps, targeting interventions, and assessing outcomes. This includes having the necessary information in the head ***and*** in the world, supported with appropriate technologies.

Organizational Change

As suggested above, organizational change is the long-term approach. Yet, despite controversy around what percentage of such initiatives are (or are not) successful, there are some necessary steps. This includes scale, timeline, feedback loops, and more.

The change model attributed to Virginia Satir suggests that change leads to a big disruption and lowered performance before ultimately leading to better outcomes. It has been suggested that smaller changes aggregated over time may be more disruptive than large-scale changes.

The term 'trojan mouse' has come to mean small experiments that explore opportunities for change. From a performance perspective, that can mean focusing on small changes that aggregate. It is certainly worth considering starting with trying out changes ***within*** L&D to get them working before taking them to the broader organization. L&D should master and own strategies like measurement, experimentation, working out loud, effective brainstorming, and more.

To Begin with

While some might quibble, it seems like starting with measurement is the biggest opportunity to catalyze change. As the saying goes "What's measured, matters". Once you start measuring what you're doing, you start to see whether it's being done well or whether there is room for improvement. That is likely to drive improvements in learning design, foster looking to other performance improvement methods, and generally serve as a catalyst for a shift.

A worthwhile investment in the shift is an oversight. Governance has both practical and strategic benefits. For one, getting stakeholders involved includes them in the solution. Having others check your work is consonant with a performance perspective as well. Determining the members, process, and metrics for a governance body puts a stake in the ground about your commitment.

After getting the basics down within L&D, taking it outward benefits from being strategic as well. Look for the eager early adopters who will partner with you for this approach. Their willingness to share data is an essential part of both the process and for leveraging success.

Ongoing

The necessary steps won't feel natural from the get-go. It takes time to adopt new ways of thinking and working. Peter de Jager, in his ***Pocketful of Change***, lays out some sensible steps for managing change.

For one, he advocates for making the change a choice. People don't resist change, according to him (using examples like changing jobs, getting married, having kids), but instead resist change that's foisted on them. Making the recipients part of the solution process, or giving them your ultimate choice and allowing them to choose whether to remain status quo or opt for a change, is suggested. The latter ***should*** be able to be done in a way that secures initial commitment, if the change truly is a step forward.

Of course, despite our best motivations, commitment can be flagged. de Jager recommends, in addition to the usual steps of evangelism and support, having not only a team for the expected problems, but one ready for the unexpected barriers.

Ultimately, such a shift will be a necessary component of creating an organization that not just survives, but thrives. Preparing before it's necessary is a smart choice.

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GETTING FROM HERE TO PERFORMANCE

So, you understand what's required, you've got a vision, and a strategy. What's next? Taking action! It's more than just theorizing; it's taking concrete steps. That includes a performance mindset, performance practices, and persisting.

Get Your Mind Right

Recognize what you're (really) here to do. Your role for the organization isn't learning. While that's the label (rightly or wrongly), the real function is, in the first instance, making sure people can do the things they know they need to do.

That includes both the skills ***and*** the knowledge resources. Which means fully understanding what is needed to be done, and then figuring out the best way to do it. Again, performance consulting, such as that outlined in Rummler's ***Serious Performance Consulting***, is a necessary and useful approach.

One of the areas folks are unlikely to be familiar with or comfortable with would be performance support design. Previously we referred to two different resources, one by Allison Rossett & Lisa Shafer, and the other by Conrad Gottfredson & Robert Mosher. Both are good, though different. We recommend you either take ownership of this area of design, or find a good partner. (Our hand is up.😉)

Strategic Choices

Within the recommended first step, above – measurement – are several levels. While in the long term you should be looking at organizational metrics, not everyone does it with all their initiatives, and other initiatives may suit lesser performance goals. Nonetheless, there should be performance goals of ***some*** level for all interventions. That is, there should be some outcome intended, and a way to ascertain whether it's happened.

To make that a tad more concrete, you could have one of several goals. You could just be looking to get better reviews from your learners. However you should be at least looking to ask ***good*** questions, as indicated in Thalheimer's ***Performance-Focused Learner Surveys***. Timing matters too.

From there, you ideally are looking to see if they can actually perform as a result of the intervention. This involves having them perform some task as an indication of success. That's true for both performance support ***and*** learning. A higher goal would be to actually see the persistence of an intervention in the workplace. If it's a task that can be automatically detected, such as proper use of a system, that's ideal. A second approach is to have someone who observes them and provides feedback on their performance.

The ideal, when possible, is to actually have an organizational performance indicator. This is something that you're looking to impact. A performance perspective suggests the latter, but the important point is to be deliberately impacting something, and then iterating until you achieve it.

GO!

Of course, the final step in all this is the first step on the journey. It's time to switch mentally to a performance perspective, and then start putting in place the necessary elements. This includes doing an upfront analysis, as well as knowing how to design both learning and performance support solutions. Finally, it's about measuring, but that may be the best place to start.

Regardless of your strategic path, it should include focusing on performance. That's the way to have an impact, and that's the way L&D ***should*** go. I encourage you to do the same.

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