Focus:

Performance Support Strategies

In the last issue of Pathways we noted that many forward-looking organizations are planning new business initiatives in anticipation of an improving economic environment. Frequently these organizations experience problems in the design and implementation of their initiatives because they fail to pay sufficient heed to human factors. It is important that such organizations anticipate potential problems and invest in their people-employees, business partners, and customer staff-or the initiatives may not succeed. It would be extremely unusual for a new initiative not to create "gaps" in knowledge, ability, or acceptance among such a large and varied group of people.

It is critical to the success of any initiative that these gaps are identified early, and that funds and resources are budgeted to address them. These investments typically take the form of programs and tools that will support and enhance the on-the-job performance of each individual who will play a role in the development and implementation of the initiative.

In this issue we look at some factors that will be important to managers responsible for the success of new business initiatives. We also provide some useful "rules of thumb" to guide managers in their initiative implementation role.

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AT ISSUE:

Managing Performance Support Strategies

In our last issue we examined some typical business goals, and the types of initiatives organizations use to realize those goals. We looked at some knowledge, skill, and attitudinal gaps that could inhibit the success of such initiatives. We also reviewed the many people within and outside the organization who are likely to display gaps in their ability to perform as needed. We pointed out the need for specific performance support strategies to address any performance gaps. In this issue we examine the role of management in selecting and implementing such performance support strategies.

Realities of Today's Business Marketplace

The role of managers responsible for introducing and implementing new business initiatives is complex, and is made even more difficult by their need to address human performance issues. Here are some business and economic realities we must simply accept and deal with in our development and implementation of performance support strategies:

1. Budgets are real and funds are limited.

2. Time-to-market is ever-decreasing.

3. Prioritization of critical success factors is paramount to the success of an initiative.

4. Employees, business partners, and customers will have different needs.

5. The rate of information and skills change in today's business environment is ever-increasing, and the information available is often conflicting and repetitive.

6. Totally self-directed learning seldom succeeds on its own.

7. Today's workforce is growing more mobile.

8. Absence of timely communications creates a dangerous vacuum.

Let's visit these issues one by one, looking at some of the implications of each, with some guidelines or "rules of thumb" for addressing the related human factors.

1. Budgets are real and funds are limited.

This, of course, is old news to anyone in management. But it has implications for the selection and design of the components that you will be able to include in your performance support strategy.

■ Your strategy should build upon what already is in place, known, understood, and effective. It should reinforce existing, accepted methodologies and best practices.

■ Consider making better use of your existing educational and communications infrastructure before investing in new delivery systems. Many organizations have found the use of their existing Internet and intranet facilities a key component of performance support delivery.

■ Formal training-especially classroom training-is expensive. There are trainer costs, facility costs, and time-away-from-the-job costs.

   • Dedicate classroom space and trainers to the development and application of skills that require interaction to be successful-for instance, interpersonal sales skills scenarios.

   • Use other methods for advanced information dissemination. Consider alternatives such as:

      ▪ Access to on-line information databases

      ▪ Performance support tools and print job aids

      ▪ Existing vendor documentation and/or adaptations specific to each user group's needs

      ▪ Print/non-print fact sheets

2. Time-to-market is ever-decreasing.

Competition forces us to deliver new initiatives faster than ever before. This means that, when you select performance support strategy options, you should:

■ Be realistic about what new performance system development and implementation can occur within your initiative's timeline.

■ Look for alternatives that can be developed and delivered within the time constraints.

(For more information about this topic, refer to the last issue of Pathways.)

3. Prioritization of critical success factors is paramount to the success of an initiative.

When planning the introduction of a new business initiative, every detailed issue seems of major importance to those responsible. But, one can't expect employees, business partners, or customers to absorb everything all at once. Often, what is critical to one group may be of no concern to others.

Give the developers of your performance support components direction:

■ Prioritize for them what you perceive are the "critical few." Determine what is critical for people to know/do/feel about the initiative and what is just "nice to know." This may entail investing some time in focus group meetings or other such methods, but it is time well-invested.

■ Have developers provide direction about where to go for more detailed information when it is needed on the job, rather than try to communicate everything to everyone. Remember that facts and skills learned but not immediately applied on the job rapidly disappear from an employee's knowledge/skill repertoire.

■ Monitor results to insure that information glut does not creep back in.

4. Employees, business partners, and customers will have different needs.

Seldom is there a single solution that will address the needs of all the people affected by a new initiative. For example, while salespeople for a new product offering will need information about competitive offerings, you will probably not want to provide such information to customers.

Here are some suggestions:

■ Identify all the audiences who will be affected by the intervention.

■ Identify what the information/skills/attitude gaps of each are.

■ Plan methods to address each gap.

■ Watch for common gaps across groups; common gaps sometimes offer an opportunity to save costs by using common components.

■ Keep in mind that a mix of options and alternatives is usually necessary.

5. The rate of information and skills change in today's business environment is ever-increasing, and the information available is often conflicting and repetitive.

New business initiatives often require the introduction of new software tools, or new releases of existing software. The associated databases, if well maintained, will be constantly revised and updated. Such changes

have important implications for the performance strategies you develop and implement.

■ Frequently used job tools and information databases should be an integral part of job skills training.

■ Changes in job tools caused by new version releases may introduce skills gaps that must be addressed.

■ Learning practice should include accessing the databases that are integral to the job of each person involved in the roll-out and implementation of the initiative.

Skill development for sales team members in this world of constant information change should emphasize judgment over rote learning.

■ Emphasize basic marketing skills, not rote responses to customer objections, canned presentations, or boilerplate proposals.

■ Plan strategies that will help sales team members develop the ability to adapt to new and changing situations in their customer's environment.

■ Emphasize sales skills that provide solutions to real customer business needs.

■ Avoid teaching rote responses to customer objections, canned presentations, boilerplate proposals, or other practices that emphasize products rather than customer-directed solutions.

6. Totally self-directed learning seldom succeeds on its own.

Few people-whether they be your employees, business partners, or customers -will "self-direct" their efforts to eliminate knowledge/skill/ attitudinal gaps. This is particularly true with regard to attitude change, but is also true for study and practice. It is also the case that even the most motivated people often don't know where or how to obtain needed information for their job tasks without management assistance.

A problem that first level managers and their people often face is-not a lack of information-but rather a glut of redundant information sources with no clear structure. Business information databases are often vast, redundant, and hard to navigate.

For all these reasons your managers (and those of your business partners and customers as well) must take an active role in developing their people if new initiatives are to succeed. They need to:

■ Provide learning tools and job performance tools that are clear, accessible, and practical. Information should be presented or made available in small, manageable "chunks."

■ Provide performers and their managers tools and techniques that define clear, direct paths through the maze of available information so as to ensure that needed information is accessed in an efficient manner.

■ In formal training situations, build in practice applying such work tools so their use will begin to become automatic.

■ Provide managers monitoring and evaluation tools so that they will be in a better position to support the development of their people.

7. Today's workforce is growing more mobile.

Employees who work their entire life for a single company are almost non-existent in the U.S. today, and are becoming increasingly rare worldwide. The reasons are many and beyond the scope of this article, but the implications for the success of new initiatives are important.

■ Your performance support strategy must address the issue of constantly developing new people.

■ This is an issue, not only for your own organization, but for those of your business partners and customers as well.

Within many organizations today there also is much physical mobility. This is particularly true for sales and delivery departments. Many salespeople typically are in the field with customers almost constantly. Much the same situation exists within consulting organizations. Consultants typically spend more time with clients than in their own offices.

■ Support components for these staff members need to be accessible when and where needed.

■ Your support strategy should include instruction and technology to permit rapid access to best practices tools, applicable information databases, and the like.

8. Absence of timely communications creates a dangerous vacuum.

Neither employees, business partners, nor customers like to be kept in the dark about new initiatives. This is a particularly critical issue when the initiative involves changes that impact them directly, such as reorganization or process re-engineering. The absence of information encourages rumor mills which can create additional problems.

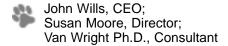Develop a comprehensive communications plan that:

■ Identifies all interested parties.

■ Includes specific scheduled processes for reporting planned changes and progress updates for each party.

In Summary

In this issue we have looked at some key realities of today's business climate that we all must face when introducing new business initiatives. To deal effectively with these realities, your performance support strategies have to be just as creative as the initiatives themselves. We hope the suggestions we've provided will aid you in the identification, development, and implementation of effective people performance support strategies.

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Invest in strategies that will support and enhance the on-the-job performance of every individual who has a role in your new initiatives.

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