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PATHWAYS

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Focus:

Knowledge is Important, but Performance is the Goal

The reason organizations hire and retain talented, creative people and invest in their on-going development is to achieve business results. In doing so, the organization assumes that talented, creative people will be able to transfer knowledge to on-the–job performance that delivers expected results.

The question is, "How do we make the most of our investment in growing our workforce's knowledge and skills?" This is a tough question, since it is not simply a matter of transferring new information, facts, and figures. We often rely too much on information transfer, dedicating too little time to practice.

Information is only of value if we are able to translate it into human performance that delivers positive business results for our organization and our clients. Moreover, we must be able to do this in a very timely manner—in some organizations it is "yesterday".

As leaders, we must constantly be on guard to avoid believing that information alone will lead to successful on-the-job performance. We need to understand that competent employees are those who know or can find required information

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AT ISSUE:

Simulating the Real World: The Key to Turning Knowledge into Performance

Today's business world is one of constant flux and change. Performance targets seem to grow faster than our workforce's capabilities. Skill deficiencies are obvious in most organizations, and need to be tackled in a proactive manner if the organization is to succeed. The solution entails not only transfering new information, but also developing workforce skills by applying that knowledge in realistic, simulated on-the-job situations.

The Value of Including Relevant Performance Practice

Most leaders have little difficulty identifying the new information their performance teams require to realize evolving performance targets. It is a more challenging task to include opportunities for meaningful, successful practice in our workforce development programs. Yet, opportunities to apply information and to practice job skills in "safe" situations are critical to the success of new organizational initiatives. If you fail to build in learning performance tasks that simulate real, relevant job activities, your performance team members will have no choice but to "practice" on the job … with real clients. When things go wrong, clients are dissatisfied, team members become demoralized, and team managers face pressure to correct missteps training could have addressed.

The remainder of this issue is designed to acquaint you with (or remind you of) a few of the many options available for building meaningful practice into your workforce development programs. We describe and explain typical uses of each option, then briefly explore some important development/delivery considerations.

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Beyond Knowledge-based Activities

In knowledge-based learning, there is nothing wrong with true-false or multiple-choice quizzes and similar kinds of "self-checks." But they do not demonstrate job-relevant application of knowledge. To demonstrate such proficiency, workforce development programs need to include activities that simulate, to a greater or lesser degree, relevant on-the-job performance tasks. Some such activities can occur in classroom learning environments, but that needn't be the only avenue to job-related practice. Such practice activities can also take place on the job. They can be self-paced or manager directed, but some sort of monitoring/control/feedback procedure must be in place to ensure successful practice.

There are many options. Some typical examples include:

- ❒ Brief scenarios
- ❒ Role-plays
- ❒ Case studies
- ❒ Simulations
- ❒ On-line research

Let's look at how each of the activities listed above can contribute to and reinforce the application of information just learned. We'll look, as well, at some of the development issues you need to consider when selecting from among these alternatives.

Brief Scenarios

These are concise descriptions (typically one or two pages) of a plausible work-related event. The scenario presents a situation causing the individual to decide upon an appropriate course of action or to choose from various options, the one which is most appropriate. Often these scenarios are print-based, but can also be delivered on-line. They can be used in classroom situations, but can also be used in individual coaching situations with a manager, or even in a self-study mode if appropriate performance feedback is provided.

Development Issues: Scenarios are relatively easy to develop, but it is key that they be *brief, realistic*, and *relevant* to the individual's job situation.

Role-plays

Like the brief scenarios described above, role-plays can be used either in the classroom or in ad hoc situations. Role playing entails the interaction (typically face-to-face) of two individuals plus a "coach." The coach may be either a co-worker, manager, or other implementer. (This involvement of three individuals is sometimes called a triad.) Role-playing is used for many types of practice: modeling effective methods, reinforcing organizational policies, and the like.

It is useful to have role-play members exchange roles. For instance, in a sales training situation, the participants gain more experience from the scenario by seeing multiple points of view: salesperson, client, and coach.

Development Issues: Effective role plays are not scripted, but they do contain sufficient information for each member of the triad to grasp and perform his/her role. The role descriptions should be tested several times before being used in large group situations or distributed for use on the job with local management.

Case studies

Case studies entail a fairly detailed, documented description of a real (but usually disguised) on-going exchange between members of two organizations. The exchange involves conflicts of interest between groups which need to be resolved. The exchange might be between two groups of your own organization, between your organization and members of a client organization, or could even entail a third party such as an outside supplier. The goal is for participants to grasp the situation and develop a solution to resolve the conflict(s) between parties.

Some typical case studies include: exploring events in a complex sales situation, tracking a challenging consulting engagement, reviewing a mortgage loan dispute, participating in a "moot court," and the like.

The case study may be brief, addressing a single event (much like a single, elaborate scenario). Often, however, the objective of a case study is to demonstrate various phases of a developing relationship (between a vendor and client for instance). In this situation, the case study may be broken into stages, with intervening information transfer sessions. Case studies have been used effectively in workforce development sessions where participants gather for one phase, return to the workplace to do research/development work on the next phase, then reassemble for the next phase. This process can continue over a period of weeks or even months.

Development Issues: Developing an effective case study requires a significant commitment of time and resources. If the developer is not a subject matter expert (SME), the time of qualified SMEs will need to be committed, both for initial information-gathering and for review of the draft product.

Most effective case studies are based on real but disguised ("sanitized") situations. Often sections of real, sanitized documents such as needs analyses, proposals, contract change orders, and the like are used. Therefore, organizations need to have a system in place to gather documentation regarding exemplar situations suitable for case study development.

The real art of case study development is to retain verisimilitude without overwhelming participants with extraneous detail.

Simulations

Simulations are similar to case studies, but needn't be based on actual, specific events of the past. Instead, they are usually realistic models of typical situations workforce members might find themselves in. As the name suggests, the intent is to simulate typical work situations without interacting with real clients or co-workers.

Simulations allow the participant(s) to attempt to perform work tasks. They have the opportunity to discover what works effectively and the consequences of errors (including acts of poor judgment) without jeopardizing organizational or their own interests. Some common simulation applications are hardware/software troubleshooting, customer service desks, banking services, aircraft navigation, and the like.

Development Issues: The simulation materials that participants use may be either print-based or on-line. The information must be realistic and representative of the event(s) being simulated.

Hardware simulations such as flight simulators may cost millions of dollars. A simulation to prepare bank tellers to react appropriately during a robbery might be produced quite inexpensively, using only a few print graphics and an event description.

On-line Research

Many service occupations, especially in areas such as market analysis and consulting services, require the ability of workforce members to do research and reporting. Today, much of that research occurs on-line. Researchers may find themselves seeking data from such sources as the Worldwide Web, corporate-proprietary intranets, and fee-for-use-based trade databases. They need to be able to navigate the Web, use data search engines, and develop a familiarity with other standard sources.

On-line research activities sometimes are included as part of a larger workforce development session or activity. As a simple example, sales staff learning about a new product (product knowledge) may be called upon to find out what comparable products are available from competitors, and then make meaningful comparisons of functions, features, and benefits.

Development Issues: Unlike case studies and simulations, on-line research depends upon actual on-line data. The three major development tasks are:

- ❒ Prepare print or on-line scenarios containing one or more problems which call upon participants to carry out research.
- ❒ Prepare lists of suggested resources to support the research.
- ❒ Specify the criteria for acceptable research performance.

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quickly, and are able to apply it to further the organization's strategic and tactical requirements. The concept of transferring information into performance is not an easy one. It requires time and commitment on the part of the organization, its managers, and co-workers. In this issue we explore a few of the methods available to move workforce development programs beyond mere information transfer. These methods also provide practice—leading to a more competent workforce and more profitable business results.

John C. Wills
President/CEO

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Developers may recommend search engines, and may provide a list of fruitful on-line sites. Resource recommendations need to be researched in advance; a few highly productive sites are better than a "laundry list." It should normally be possible for participants to succeed in finding the data called out for in the scenario in a reasonable amount of time. You may wish to acknowledge in some way those who discover new, productive sites.

In Summary

Effective workforce development programs go beyond information transfer alone. They include practice that causes workforce members to apply new knowledge in safe, realistic, job-relevant situations. In this way, workforce members have both the knowledge and the skills necessary to address real workplace situations as they arise.

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Competent workforce members know how to find needed information fast, then apply it in a way that furthers the goals of their organization.

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