

DESIGNING FOR PERFORMANCE, PART 1: ALIGNING YOUR HPT DECISIONS FROM TOP TO BOTTOM

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Wanting to improve individual and organizational performance is a worthwhile ambition. Yet your success in accomplishing this relies heavily on the suitable selection, design, and development of performance technologies. Only when capable performance technologies are systematically aligned with the desired results of your organization and its partners will you achieve sustainable performance improvements. In this article, the first of a three-part series, you will find a systematic process for initiating the design of a performance system that will accomplish useful results. From identifying the performance expectations of internal and external partners to justifying the performance objectives you establish as guides for future decision making, the systematic processes described in this article will provide you with the initial tools for successfully selecting an integrated set of performance technologies that have the capacity to accomplish valuable results.

THE SUCCESS AND MERIT of any human performance technology (HPT) are derived from its ability to accomplish valuable results that are aligned with the strategic ambitions of your organization and its partners. And though this may at first sound like a simple and straightforward undertaking, don't be fooled. The tasks associated with identifying and selecting the right performance technologies for accomplishing useful results can often be more taxing than those associated with developing and implementing the selected performance interventions.

From clarifying the expected results to sorting through the hundreds of potential performance technologies that are available, the processes associated with aligning what you do with what you want to accomplish require a focused and systematic approach. Just as you would use systematic design procedures for developing instructional materials or creating an online performance support tool, you will be most successful at identifying and selecting the right performance technologies when you formalize and continually improve your decision-making processes.

This article, the first of three focusing on the systematic design of performance systems, provides a structured process for aligning all your HPT decisions, from

top to bottom. This alignment will verify that whichever performance technologies you select for achieving results will produce valuable contributions to the long-term success of your organization, its clients, and its partners. Because performance is all about achieving valuable results, this first article will focus on identifying and defining desired results. The second article in this series will then provide a useful framework for selecting the *right* set of performance technologies for accomplishing those desired results. In the final article a systematic process for designing, developing, and continually improving upon the results you are accomplishing will be described. Together, these three articles can provide you with a practical framework for developing performance systems designed to accomplish valuable results.

Your time and energy are precious commodities and, thus, should be used wisely. Avoid spinning your wheels designing, developing, and implementing performance technologies that may or may not accomplish the results desired by your organization and its partners. Resist premature selection of performance technologies, made before the desired outcomes are clearly defined. Achieve both of these goals by starting with a systematic process

that aligns all of your performance improvement decisions. This ensures that the performance technologies you select for development and implementation will be aligned with achievement of worthwhile results.

WHAT IS PERFORMANCE AND WHY MUST WE DESIGN FOR IT?

To start with, *performance* should not be confused with *performing* (Gilbert & Gilbert, 1989; Watkins & Leigh, 2001). This is an important yet often misunderstood distinction. Performing is what we do, whereas performance is the useful result that we accomplish. Airplane pilots, for instance, perform a variety of activities and safety procedures to ensure that the desired performance of a safe landing is accomplished. Similarly, we brush our teeth each evening to achieve the desired result of no tooth decay. Performing and performance have an interdependent relationship but distinctive characteristics.

In all professions and for all tasks, we benefit when we can separate what we do (that is, *performing*) from what we accomplish (that is, *performance*). This separation allows us to focus on the performance as an objective and to subsequently select the processes for achieving that performance from all the options available (Watkins, 2006b). In other words, it allows us to accomplish results without the constraints of preselected interventions. When this distinction is operative, the start of effective efforts to improve performance is rooted in the accomplishment of valuable results rather than just the improvement of what people do.

Although both performance and performing can be improved, improving the latter does not necessarily ensure that you will make gains in the former. Improving the efficiency of a process (for instance, using an electric toothbrush to shorten the time required to brush your teeth) does not necessarily mean that you are going to accomplish useful and desirable results (fewer cavities). Many organizations have found this to be true. For example, increasing investments in training as a performance technology does not consistently lead to the intended or desired results (Stolovitch, 2002; Clark & Estes, 2002). The same lackluster results are equally familiar in mentoring, software development, leadership workshops, employee retention programs, and almost any other performance technologies you can imagine when they are not properly aligned and associated with the accomplishment of desired performance.

An inappropriate or misaligned set of performance interventions will not lead to sustainable performance improvements. Your performance technology

decisions should therefore focus first and foremost on the accomplishment of valuable results. Only after identifying the results you want to accomplish should you begin to select the performance solutions (for example, career counseling, workplace redesign, incentive systems, training, computer systems) that will most efficiently and effectively achieve those results. In this way you can align all your HPT decisions from top to bottom. Decisions—from “What results do our clients’ clients want us to accomplish?” to “Should we use a combination of balanced scorecards and team building?”—can then be made with a principal focus on the accomplishment of desired performance (that is, results).

WHERE DOES ALIGNMENT BEGIN?

Alignment begins with the strategic goals and objectives of individuals, organizations, communities, and societies. It begins with these intentions because they define the expected results of any performance improvement effort. The anticipated results from your organization are, for example, set by the clients, clients’ clients, and community partners that buy and use the products or services your organization delivers. Likewise, your organization expects definable results from each division, department, team, project, employee, and supplier. All these anticipated results make up a system of strategic goals and ambitions that should be the foundation for all the decisions you will make in selecting, designing, developing, and implementing performance technologies.

The performance expectations of most organizations are readily communicated through strategic plans and related documents. Ideally, these planning documents provide practical guidance for decision making. You can then use them to align your performance initiatives with the strategic objectives of your organization and its partners (Watkins, 2006b).

For employees at all levels of any organization, strategic plans should offer guidance and support for making personnel, acquisitions, time-management, performance improvement, and all the other decisions that are linked to organizational accomplishments. Yet, as most HPT professionals have witnessed, strategic plans are typically created every year or two only to sit on the shelf and gather dust. These plans typically fail to focus on intended results and instead merely identify a wish list of new initiatives (Watkins, Triner, & Kaufman, 1996; Mintzberg, 1994), giving no clear guidance to essential decisions about which performance technologies to implement. This failure of strategic plans frequently leads to choices that are not aligned

TABLE 1	STEPS IN DECODING STRATEGIC DIRECTION
STEP TOWARD SUCCESS	BRIEF DESCRIPTION
<p>Step 1</p> <p>Review strategic plans and related documents</p>	<p>Look at strategic plans for client organizations, suppliers, competitors, regional community groups, and any others who play a part in defining what results should be accomplished within and by your organization. Also examine annual reports and other documents for clues about the results anticipated in the upcoming years and the ways those expectations may influence your decisions. Assess each strategic document for information that will help you align what you use, do, and produce with the results your organization delivers to clients and the contributions of those results to the local community and society (Kaufman, 2000, 2006; Watkins, 2006a).</p>
<p>Step 2</p> <p>Review needs assessment results</p>	<p>In practical terms assessment is a process used by individuals or organizations to determine the value or worth of something (Scriven, 1967). Likewise, organizations use needs assessments as a structured process for identifying discrepancies between desired results (ideally as defined at three levels through systemic strategic planning) and current results in order to assess their value or worth (Kaufman, 2006). Needs assessments can provide information that is of exceptional value and often essential for selecting appropriate performance technologies. Conclusions derived from needs assessments will help you prioritize among competing strategic ambitions.</p>
<p>Step 3</p> <p>Review SWOT analysis results*</p>	<p>A SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats) analysis identifies environmental and operational factors you should consider in defining the results you are going to accomplish and thus your definitions of success. According to Leigh (2006), SWOT analyses identify strengths as enhancers of desired performance and weaknesses as inhibitors, and both are within an organization's control. For example, your strengths might include employee knowledge, reliable suppliers, or new technologies, and your threats might include new competitors, employee recruitment, or limited raw materials. Opportunities are also identified as enhancers of desired performance and threats as inhibitors, but both are outside an organization's control.</p>
<p>Step 4</p> <p>Set priorities</p>	<p>The final step in decoding the strategic direction is to set priorities among the numerous goals and objectives that may be diverse or appear to be competing. Translate the desired results of multiple partners into a set of performance priorities that you can aim to achieve. This can be challenging, but your analysis of the results of strategic planning, needs assessments, and SWOT analyses (of factors both internal and external to your organization) will give you the necessary data.</p> <p>When prioritizing the expected results from numerous partners, you should remain focused on performance (that is, results). You should avoid confusing desired processes (such as quality management, leadership workshops, outsourcing, and other performance technologies) with the desired results at the individual or team, organizational, and societal levels. Desired performance at each of these levels will define the results your performance improvements should accomplish, thereby defining your success.</p>

* If your organization has not recently completed a systematic, results-focused strategic planning, needs assessment, or SWOT analysis, then you should champion these efforts before making decisions about which performance technologies to design, develop, and implement. Moving ahead without these guides to validate and justify your decisions can lead to misinformed choices and less-than-desirable results.

Source: Based on Watkins, 2006b.

TABLE 2		STEPS IN DERIVING PERFORMANCE OBJECTIVES	
STEP TOWARD SUCCESS	BRIEF DESCRIPTION		
Step 1 Analyze strategic goals	<p>From the prioritized performance expectations of your organization and its partners, derive the specific results that will lead to attaining strategic goals. For example, if your organization has a strategic objective of increasing the number of successful sales calls to 50 per day, then you would want to analyze that objective to determine what interim results must be achieved to make it a reality (for example, motivated sales agents, phone systems that can handle increased volumes, a receptionist who accurately assesses and forwards appropriate calls). Only later on will you consider what performance technologies can accomplish these desired results (for example, incentive systems, mentoring, high-tech phone systems, receptionist training, job aids, or online performance support tools).</p>		
Step 2 Select your performance objectives	<p>Carefully select the results you are committed to accomplishing. Prioritize, group, and review the results of previous analyses, then identify a set of performance objectives that will guide your decisions about which performance technologies to design, develop, and implement.</p> <p>At the same time, use this effort as an opportunity to negotiate with internal and external partners on the results criteria that will be used to evaluate success. Performance objectives will be the primary (if not sole) criteria used to evaluate the accomplishments of selected performance technologies.</p>		
Step 3 Relate objectives and current processes	<p>You are likely to find that your organization is already making valuable contributions to the achievement of the selected performance objectives. To capitalize on these current accomplishments you should connect each performance objective with the current processes making measurable contributions. For example, if one performance objective is the elimination of lost office supplies, then you should identify any current initiatives to track, store, or inventory office supplies and also identify the results they are achieving.</p>		
Step 4 Perform a task analysis	<p>Complete a task analysis for each of the current organizational processes (both those achieving and not achieving desired levels of performance). Task analyses describe and document current processes in your organization, offering valuable insights that can inform decisions for improving performance. Performance technologies can then complement or supplement the current activities to accomplish your selected performance objectives (Watkins, 2006b).</p> <p>The task analysis technique(s) used to identify and document process activities and results will depend on the process itself. Use hierarchical, if-then, model-based, or cognitive task analysis techniques, either individually or together, to review the details of the ways current results are being achieved (Jonassen, Tessmer, & Hannum, 1999; Watkins, 2006b).</p>		
Step 5 Review and revise performance objectives	<p>Given the information obtained through the task analyses, reexamine your selected performance objectives to verify that they should remain the focus of your improvement efforts. Frequently, while completing your task analyses, you will learn about new initiatives or about programs that are being phased out. As a result you may want to change the performance objectives you strive to accomplish or the priorities that you established earlier.</p> <p>This is also an excellent time to verify the alignment of performance expectations from top to bottom. Review each of the strategic ambitions and related performance objectives to ensure that the achievement of results at one level (such as the societal or organizational levels) is supported by the achievement of results at other levels (such as the organizational, team, or individual levels). This alignment of intended results is the only foundation on which you can base practical decisions about which performance technologies to select.</p>		

Source: Based on Watkins, 2006b.

with the strategic ambitions of the organization or its partners (who range from clients, suppliers, and clients' clients to society as a whole).

Aligning your HPT decisions with the desired results of your organization and its partners is the sensible alternative. Knowing and accomplishing valuable results is the key to your success, your organization's success, and its partners' success. For instance, even the best-developed online performance tool for sales managers is not worth the investment if it does not accomplish results that add value to the individuals and organizations that are part of the performance system.

DECODING STRATEGIC DIRECTION

Use a variety of sources and tools to align your decisions with the strategic ambitions of your organization and its partners. Start by identifying the results that should be accomplished. Review the strategic plans of your organization as well as the plans of clients, clients' clients, suppliers, and other external partners with a stake in defining expected results. Then supplement that information with the results of any needs assessments conducted by your organization or its partners and the results of any analyses that have defined strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (SWOT). Use all three of these resources to shape and characterize the desired results that will drive all your performance technology decisions (see Table 1). From your intended results to your solution set of performance technologies, let your decisions be guided by strategic objectives.

DEFINING SUCCESS

The success of any performance technology is ultimately defined by its ability to accomplish useful results, for individuals and organizations alike. Yet the process of defining success for performance improvement efforts (and specific performance technologies) quickly becomes convoluted and challenging as you begin to analyze the criteria for success. After all, success is typically more a perception than a fact, and not just a single perception but the multiple perceptions of partners, sponsors, and clients. A performance technology project will likely have multiple players involved in the selection, design, development, implementation, and evaluation of the technologies, and then it will have multiple workers, supervisors, clients, clients' clients, and other stakeholders evaluating the results long after the project has concluded; each of these individuals and

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groups represents a different perspective on the success of the project (Watkins, 2006a).

Adding to the challenge, most perspectives on success are developed with few supporting data. Personalities, politics, budgets, personal agendas, and other variables often play an equal or greater role than the numbers do in determining the generalized success of a performance improvement effort. In addition, HPT initiatives (as well as many other professional activities) are frequently designed, developed, or implemented following one set of criteria and then evaluated according to a different set.

Nevertheless, you should recognize and attend to the diverse strategic goals and objectives of both internal and external partners in any improvement project. These expected results can then guide your decision making and ensure that your selected performance technologies accomplish valuable results.

Define success for your project with specific performance objectives that are aligned with the strategic ambitions of your organization and its partners. Your definition of success then describes the results you are committed to accomplishing; it does not distract you or others from those results by listing the performance technologies that may be used. This approach not only provides clear guidance for your HPT decisions but also ensures that *favorite solutions* do not interfere with the accomplishment of useful results.

STEPS FOR SETTING YOUR OBJECTIVES

Using the prioritized strategic ambitions, set your performance objectives. Far more than a list of desired benefits (such as increased profits, improved efficiency, or less turnover), performance objectives describe the results to be accomplished, the criteria that will define success, and the ways those criteria will be assessed. The performance objectives you derive from the strategic goals of your organization and its partners will then guide your

decisions about the performance technologies that will best achieve those results.

Expected results at the societal level are not defined by a single organization, nor is it expected that any one organization will accomplish them on its own (Kaufman, 2006). Likewise, no single performance improvement effort is expected to accomplish all the desired results of an organization and its partners (Watkins, 2006a). Although performance technologies can accomplish remarkable results, you must align your improvement efforts with prioritized strategic goals. This will not only guide your decision making during the selection of appropriate interventions but it will also provide unambiguous criteria for evaluating any performance technologies that are developed and implemented (see Table 2).

NEXT STEPS TO SUCCESS

The alignment of strategic ambitions with performance objectives provides the ideal grounding for HPT decisions. By focusing first and foremost on performance expectations, you can systematically select performance interventions that will achieve those results. Use this foundation to guide your decisions, and you will consistently select, design, and develop valuable performance technologies.

Notice that up to this point no specific performance technologies have been identified or selected for implementation. And there is still one more step to complete before you can systematically select a justifiable set of performance solutions. Before choosing any interventions you must define the performance assessments linked to each performance objective. Performance assessments are used both to evaluate the performance capacity of alternative technologies and to assess the accomplishments of completed improvement efforts. In the next article of this series, a systematic process for using these assessments to judge the value of potential solutions will be described in detail. Then steps for using the *performance pyramid* (see Wedman & Graham, 1998) will be offered as a systematic process for identifying compatible performance technologies that when used in combination will accomplish desired results.

In designing performance systems it is important to begin with clear and measurable definitions of the performance that must be accomplished, and then let those desired results guide all your decisions. Start by completing a practical examination of the strategic plans, needs assessments, and SWOT analysis findings of your organization and its external partners. Next, verify that

the performance ambitions of each organization are aligned and that your performance improvement efforts will contribute valuable results toward those ends. Align all of your decisions with the accomplishment of these results, and your performance improvement efforts will be successful. 🌟

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