

Great Ideas Revisited

THEN

Performance: 1976

BY JOE HARLESS

The biggest problem in the next 12 months will be problem solving. Because most 1976 organizations are struggling with an array of human performance problems, training (which is one solution to a problem) will be measured in terms of how well it contributes to the solution.

Too long have trainers been cast in the role (willingly, perhaps) of developers and deliverers of instruction. Today's more sophisticated management is looking for ways to influence performance on the job, rather than counting heads and using a variety of audiovisuals in the classroom.

Thus, I believe we have an opportunity, not a problem, to contribute to an organization's bottom line and goals because there's a need to—perhaps a demand. One way is to look, aggressively and systematically, for ways to avoid instruction when training isn't appropriate or cost-effective and when a job aid will do.

We can grasp the opportunity if we:

- ▶ change the way we look at our jobs and begin thinking of ourselves as human performance developers and problem solvers instead of advocates of one type of solution
- ▶ invest more of our front-end time in analysis before we recommend training
- ▶ become conservative about the wholesale implementation of fads and panaceas
- ▶ accept difficult human performance problems to analyze and solve. ■

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Looking Back: 1996

BY JOE HARLESS



I hereby resign from the predicting business. We should judge a prognosticator by the accuracy of what was predicted. But we should also assess him or her by the accuracy of when the predictions come to pass. Prophets would always be right, if the criterion of time wasn't involved. Holding myself to that measure, I admit failure in the predicting game. The items I foretold in 1976 are just now coming to fruition, 20 years later.

Many managers are now recognizing human performance as the key to organizational performance. That recognition is leading training clients to demand that any interventions (especially training interventions) be measured for value—specifically, how well they affect job performance and bottom-line business goals. That has precipitated considerable movement toward performance-based instruction and away from subject matter-based instruction. Management wants to know what trainees can do and produce—not just which facts, concepts, and theories they know. As a result, a paradigm shift from training to performance is occurring.

Since 1976, we've redefined the term "performance," from employees' behavior to the desired accomplishments resulting from employees' actions on the job. We've reasoned that it isn't just a behavior change that management wants; it's an improvement in the output. Now, in the analysis phase of our process, the first thing we seek is desired accomplishments that contribute to an or-

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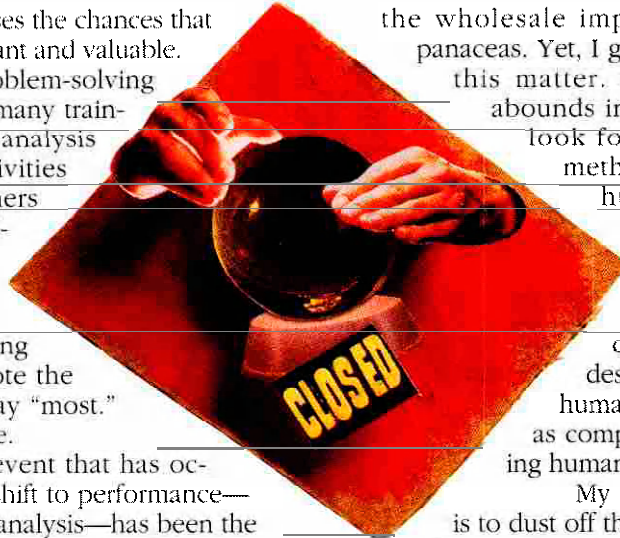
NOW

ganization's bottom line. This increases the chances that the behaviors we influence are relevant and valuable.

As I predicted 20 years ago, problem-solving models have made their way into many trainers' repertoire, such as front-end analysis and needs assessment. Those activities are now the first steps many trainers undertake, before design and development. Many trainers now realize that instruction should be, and can be, avoided because an analysis often shows that nontraining interventions are required. But note the words, "many trainers." I didn't say "most." There's still a large opportunity here.

Perhaps the most noteworthy event that has occurred as a result of the paradigm shift to performance—and the incorporation of front-end analysis—has been the development of the field of performance technology. Performance technologists behave as human-performance developers and problem solvers rather than as advocates of any one type of solution, such as training. Though that's just a ripple on the corporate lake right now, there's evidence that the time for this idea has come—another opportunity.

Some practitioners have become conservative about



the wholesale implementation of fads and panaceas. Yet, I give myself a failing grade on this matter. Flavor-of-the-month still abounds in our field. We still tend to look for the one intervention or methodology that will solve all human-performance problems. We still search for the easy way out. And we still embrace methods and hardware that don't call for rigorous analysis and design. Diagnosing and treating human-performance problems are as complex as diagnosing and treating human medical problems.

My almost overwhelming desire is to dust off the old crystal ball and look at the next 20 years. But I've already resigned from the predicting business. ■

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