

TRAINING 101

Hop On Up Here

Examination tips to check the health of your performance environment

By Reinhard Ziegler

Pharmaceutical companies spend big money on TV advertisements to introduce new drugs. Those ads often close with the comment, “Ask your doctor if (insert drug name here) is right for you.” What would happen if your physician scribbled out a prescription without first tapping his hand on the examination table and saying, “Hop up here, and let’s take a look at you.” You may receive short-term relief, but you’d sacrifice your long-term confidence in the doctor’s

professionalism. Those ads tempt you with the elixir of the day. To determine whether that drug is right for you, it’s the responsibility of the medical professional to examine you.

In the human performance business, a similar phenomenon plays out. An executive, while attending a conference or meeting, hears about the industry’s latest business solution. The next thing you know, that executive is determined to get her hands on the new miracle

drug. She wants to implement the latest e-learning tool or knowledge management solution—and she wants it done now.

But can her organization's performance environment handle the e-learning or KM elixir? To implement the desired fix successfully, she must plan and execute the solution in the overall context of the performance environment.

Performance environment

To stay with our metaphor, the performance environment is the body into which you pump that new miracle drug. Without first conducting a thorough examination, your new e-learning or KM initiative could have no effect, have a placebo effect, or interact negatively with other aspects of the environment.

The most effective performance environments are those with an integrated view of work, worker, and workplace. They're technology-enabled environments that enhance workforce performance by minimizing the distinction between working and learning, KM and collaboration, and communication and performance management. They're integrated sociotechnical systems that create competitive performance. The problem: Companies rarely, if ever, begin from that integrated state. It's the destination, not the starting point.

Scalpel, doctor?

To assess the current state of your performance environment, a diagnosis—one that tests strategy against reality—is in order. Sometimes that examination is brief. If you complain to your doctor that you have a severe sore throat and fever, a quick strep test will verify what's ailing you. But often, as is the case in organizations, the problem isn't that obvious.

As you embark on an e-adventure, figure out how your company shares knowledge and creates learning throughout the organization and with partners and customers. Ask, What kind of human performance is necessary to propel the organization toward its strategic goals and increased competitive advantage? To answer, you'll need to have a clear vision of how each intervention contributes to overall business success.

Here's where a performance environment strategy comes into play. Articulation of the strategy and its related as-is diagnosis are vital to organizational effectiveness. Ask management these questions:

- What systems are in place to share knowledge within the business and across business units?
- Is knowledge sharing viewed as a natural component of your employees' job responsibilities?
- To what extent are your performance feedback and appraisal processes linked to training needs?
- Can less-experienced individuals easily identify and contact experts?
- Do employees have access to learning and job support materials when and where they need them? Do your customers?
- Are individual, team, and organizational learning seen as a continuum?
- Does learning look and feel like work, and does work look and feel like learning?

Final diagnosis

The answers to those questions provide a diagnosis of your performance environment. It lets you know whether your organization is ready to implement the latest cure-all initiative. The diagnosis also ensures the long-term success of your workforce and business performance plan.

Sometimes, beginning with a platform to deliver and manage online education makes sense, but unless you deliver that remedy in the broader context of organizational fitness, you risk leaving lots of value on the table. The figure on the following page shows one way to conceptualize the spectrum of performance environments and business value.

Learning, knowledge sharing,
and innovation define the emergent
performance environment.

Whether beginning with a basic, transaction-driven solution or thinking in broader, value-oriented terms, having a clear strategy is crucial to the overall health plan for your organization. Your strategy acts as the basis for your business cases, which you need to maintain the attention and resolve of stakeholders.

Armed with a business case and management support, you're ready to move your organization from a basic learning management system implementation to a broader perspective in which e-learning is integrated with performance management, competency management, and project staffing. As the organizational body becomes accustomed to its new life, it establishes an environ-



This figure represents one way to conceptualize the spectrum of performance environments and business value.

ment in which learning and working are seamlessly interwoven.

When the performance environment reaches a high state of integration with business processes, employees stop thinking of learning as a separate activity. Learning, knowledge sharing, and innovation define the emergent performance environment.

Ready to go under the knife?

Usually the most obvious—and often ignored—question for companies is

whether they have a culture that will readily extract value from new learning and collaboration technologies. If your people aren't ready, you risk huge losses of time and investment. There's no use writing a prescription that no one will take or, worse yet, handing someone the latest miracle drug without a sense of its side effects. When it comes to implementing e-learning and knowledge management solutions, developing a performance environment strategy is to your organization what holistic medicine is to your

personal well-being. Don't forget the bigger picture. It may be just what the doctor ordered.

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