

Are You Doing High-Impact HR?

BY KENNETH E. CARLISLE AND DAN HENRIE

DO THE TRAINING INTERVENTIONS IN YOUR ORGANIZATION TRULY HAVE AN EFFECT? HERE IS A WAY TO ASSESS YOUR HR DEPARTMENT AND SOME TECHNIQUES FOR IMPROVING PROCESSES AND GETTING RESULTS.

By now, most of us are familiar with the watchwords of modern business: on-the-job training, multimedia, instructional systems design, performance technology, human resource development, organizational development, total-quality management, just-in-time management, and so forth.

But often the results of such approaches have been slow and disappointing. Organizations are recognizing that productivity and quality mean more than just other ways of doing things or other ways of treating people; productivity and quality are about long-term results.

The human resource function can play an important role in repositioning a company to achieve high-impact results. The Organizational-Impact Grid, on page 48, provides a structure for evaluating the HR department's role.

A human resource department can measure the results it achieves in terms of two different kinds of training interventions: accomplishment-based and context-based. Those two variables form the X and Y axes of the Organizational-Impact Grid.

Accomplishment-based interventions are interventions—such as training, consulting, development, and incentives—that elicit task-specific behaviors that contribute to organizational objectives.

Context-based interventions are those that focus on the work environment—the context for performance—in which accomplishments occur. Such interventions deal with principles and processes that are applicable to all job tasks. The premise is that certain environments will enhance the speed, quality, and efficiency with which accomplishments are achieved, by manipulating such variables as communication styles, problem-solving approaches, and processes for working together.

High or low?

Most HR organizations fit into one of the following four categories, which define the quadrants of the grid: transactions, context, results, and high-impact.

Transactions. A transactional HR organization is low context/low accomplishment. The department's role is mainly administrative and

clerical. Transactions consist of fulfilling requests; little or no attention is paid to results.

A transaction-based organization tends to view itself as an in-house distributor of prefabricated human resource solutions in the form of training programs, performance-review systems, and other interventions that are perceived to improve productivity. Transactions are characterized by a minimal concern for the purpose of the program or service requested, other than that "someone with enough clout asked for it." That seems to be a good enough reason for a transaction.

Many of the training interventions or transactions are delivered by external consultants and suppliers.

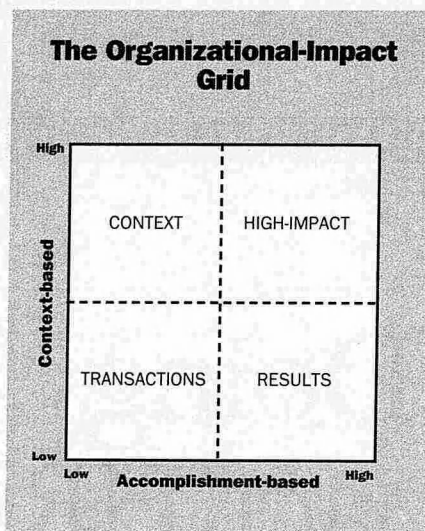
Transactional HR organizations may facilitate valuable context- or accomplishment-based programs, but such programs are inconsistent when it comes to adding value. Most transaction-based HR functions spend a lot of time on inconsequential activities. That makes the transaction-based HR department a prime target for elimination during cost containments. Other entities can easily duplicate the skills and services the department provides.

Context. A context-based HR organization is high context/low accomplishment. It's typically staffed by competent, experienced human resource professionals who have psychological or organizational orientations.

Its mission is to develop the host company via human resources and to ensure high productivity that translates into marketplace competition—goals that are lofty and admirable, but somewhat elusive.

Context HR's emphasis on broad, long-term solutions is often expensive. It produces few immediate results because it's usually based on the false assumption that teaching people about the right context will somehow create it.

A context-based HR organization tries to improve processes rather than results. It's often characterized by feel-good training programs on culture, values, motivation, leadership, teamwork, continuous improvement, and communication. The programs may sound good, look good, and



make participants feel good, but they don't contribute significantly to bottom-line performance.

Students of context HR learn how to work together well and how to organize the work environment effectively. But in the real world, they often forget the golden rules they learned in training. That's because a corporate culture already exists in which financial results are rewarded more readily than teamwork.

Few contextual HR organizations make full use of instructional technology, though they do emphasize the development and implementation phases of training. In context-based HR interventions, classroom training removes people from the workplace and puts them in pleasant settings. Seating arrangements are designed to facilitate open communication. Video programs are used to elicit powerful emotional responses. The typical contextual HR organization is comfortable providing likeable programs about soft skills.

Context-based HR organizations tend to like fads. They neglect front-end analysis, task analysis, and evaluation. They prefer "happy-sheet" evaluations and long-term organizational assessment instruments that require little accountability from the people who are supposed to improve the organizational climate.

Consequently, context-oriented HR considers participants' reactions to be a key factor in evaluation. Measuring context-based training in terms of job performance and valued

accomplishments is difficult. Instead, context-based HR promises that constant attention to the contextual factors will eventually lead to improved quality and productivity—but it also warns people not to expect immediate results.

During business slumps, companies are more likely to eliminate transactional HR organizations than context-based ones. But a contextual HR function is still fairly vulnerable, due to its image as a nonstaple in the organizational diet.

Results. A results-oriented HR department is low context/high accomplishment. It tends to be staffed with competent, experienced HR professionals who have behavioral orientations. The department often depends heavily on subject matter experts from line and management positions.

Results-oriented HR tries to ensure that employees are willing and able to do their jobs and that they produce desired accomplishments. It tends to focus on line training, on-the-job training, jobs aids, troubleshooting guides, and performance incentives.

Results-oriented HR utilizes such performance technologies as front-end analysis and instructional systems design. But it somewhat ignores the context in which performance occurs. Results-based HR believes in integrity, teamwork, and leadership, but it doesn't address those issues very well.

Results-oriented HR finds safety in teaching people things that are directly related to line objectives. Results-based HR can demonstrate its value to a company because it evaluates outcomes in ways that are meaningful to non-HR people. For that reason, a results-oriented HR organization isn't likely to be cut during tough times; it's more likely to be absorbed into a company's operational departments.

High-impact. High-impact HR is high context/high accomplishment. It focuses on both desired accomplishments and the context for performance. A high-impact HR organization recognizes that teamwork, continuous improvement, innovation, and leadership by themselves aren't worthy accomplishments. They

are contextual issues that managers must manage in order to produce accomplishments. High-impact HR dictates that such principles and processes shouldn't be taught as end results, but as the means to achieving desired results.

High-impact HR aligns training and other interventions with organizational and line objectives. It understands that it's necessary to create a high-context environment that continually renews synergy. To achieve that end, high-impact HR provides only interventions that offer immediate cost savings or improved quality. They must include a means for improving the context for performance as well. Trainees learn and implement soft, contextual skills as they plan, implement, and track important business accomplishments.

High-impact HR understands and uses instructional design and delivery, performance technology, and organizational design and development—when those approaches make business sense. Evaluation presents an opportunity for the HR organization and the company as a whole to recognize success and to gather information for continuous improvement. High-impact HR is state-of-the-art, but not faddish.

A high-impact HR group can be at risk—not because it's vulnerable to elimination during downturns, but because it promises big results. Companies require the same degree of accountability from high-impact HR organizations as they do from operations, marketing, and business-development departments.

In fact, if a company does not expect immediate, high-impact results from its HR function—and does not hold HR accountable for those results—then by definition it is not using a high-impact approach.

Case scenarios

To clarify the distinctions among the four categories of HR organizations, let's examine several HR departments to see where they fall on the Organizational-Impact Grid.

HR organization A. This organization specializes in providing training that is requested, at the right time and in the least costly manner. The department is lean, with only a training

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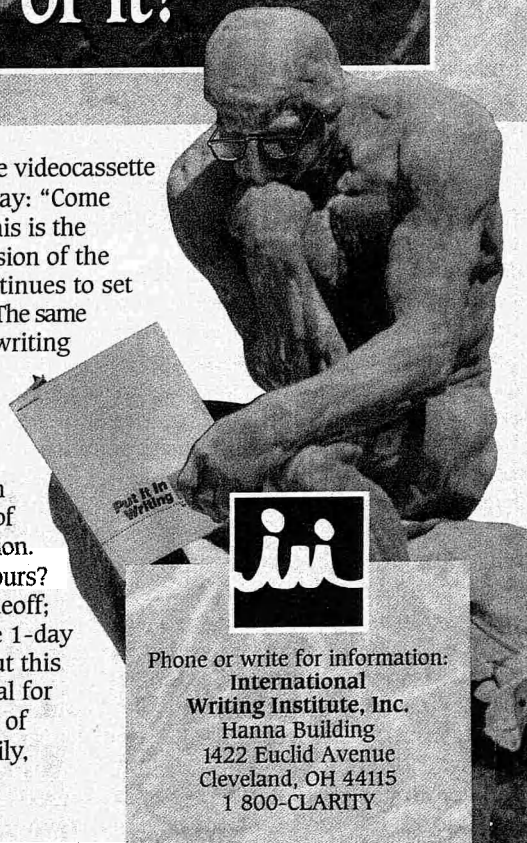
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manager and two assistants. To keep costs down, the department uses external consultants to deliver training.

When the HR department receives a request for training, an assistant arranges for the appropriate consultant, schedules the training facilities, informs trainees, and follows up to make sure everything was satisfactory.

The main measure of effectiveness is the number of workshops taught per year. The department maintains a library of training products; it provides videos and books on request.

HR organization A is a typical transactions group (low context/low accomplishment). Its main concern is low-cost delivery of requested training, with little consideration of needs beyond the request itself.

HR organization B. This organization's main mission is to help managers fill open job positions. It takes requests for new employees from department managers, helps write job descriptions, advertises openings, arranges interviews, processes paperwork, and conducts new-employee orientations. The main measure of effectiveness is "following through on what hiring managers requested."

HR organization B also belongs to the transactions category. Its main concern is fulfilling the requests of hiring managers, not the company's needs. Issues such as the quality of job candidates, recruiting costs, and recruiting cycle times are less important than administering hiring managers' plans and processes.

HR organization C. This organization is staffed by instructional media people who were schooled to produce high-quality overhead transparencies, tapes, and so forth. They pride themselves on being on the cutting edge of training technology. They use the latest delivery systems such as videotapes, computer-based training, and interactive videos. Their newest specialty is multimedia, though they continue to develop and deliver the traditional products that are requested.

Clients from all over the company request programs from HR organization C. Many of the programs are used in safety training and new-employee orientations. Each month, the department produces a corporate news video. On request from clients, HR organization C creates highly

entertaining self-instructional programs based on instructional objectives and competency-based tests.

HR organization C is another transactional group. Its main concern is delivering products as requested and using high-tech delivery media, with little thought of the company's needs. It emphasizes instructional objectives, tests, and results rather than the work environment. Its failure to pay attention to real business accomplishments keeps it from being a results-oriented organization.

HR organization D. This organization was formed to provide training services for a large franchising organization. At first, the trainers were franchise managers who had no human resource experience. They developed a traveling road show of week-long seminars about managing fran-

THE MAIN MEASURE
OF EFFECTIVENESS
IS THE NUMBER
OF WORKSHOPS
PER YEAR

chises. All franchise owners were required to send one employee to a workshop at least once a year.

Gradually, many of the trainers were replaced by people who had educational backgrounds or experience in psychology. The workshops began to be less job-related and more about managerial and communication skills.

Management became enthusiastic after hearing glowing reports from workshop attendees about the splendid trainers and useful information. Attendees enjoyed the time away from operations and liked contemplating new ideas. Best of all, the franchise owners felt they were being supported by the corporate office.

HR organization D is also a transaction-based group. Its main concern is delivering training as requested; it doesn't consider the company's real needs, other than making franchise owners feel that they have received good service. But the emphasis on

generic managerial and communication skills indicates a more context-oriented than results-oriented focus.

HR organization E. This organization designs, develops, and implements a merit-based compensation program. Salary increases are awarded each year to employees according to their performances, as appraised by managers. Performance-review guidelines focus on principles and processes such as integrity, leadership, technical ability, and communication practices.

HR organization E takes a contextual approach to performance improvement (high context/low accomplishment). Salary increases tend to reward process variables rather than actual results. The department's interventions emphasize skills in leadership, communication, and technical ability. The paradigm is that if employees concentrate on how they do their jobs, the desired results will take care of themselves.

HR organization F. A traditional, family-owned and family-managed chain of grocery stores formed this HR group to help change its corporate culture.

Training taught senior managers to communicate more effectively and dress for success. Senior managers were very pleased with the change in the company. Everyone became more formal and polished; suits and dresses are now the order of the day.

A new training program focuses on improving customer service, and an upcoming one for store managers covers employee motivation.

Clearly, HR organization F falls into the context category as well. Its main concern is changing such contextual factors as communication, interpersonal styles, and dress. The fact that changes occurred—senior managers dressed better—shows that the department is having a greater effect than a transactional HR organization might. But the failure to link changes in context with business accomplishments keeps HR organization F from producing high-impact results.

HR organization G. This organization was formed to implement a company's new total-quality management program. The company wants to be number one in quality in its industry and wants to compete for the Malcolm Baldrige National Quality

Award. With those long-term goals in mind, the firm hired a person with a doctoral degree in business to direct the program.

The first step was to ensure that all managers were trained in TQM philosophy, language, and methods. The company hired external trainers to conduct classes and organized teams to begin diagnosing problems, with the help of newly hired facilitators. Each team has already diagnosed about 10 problems. And the HR group is planning a customer survey for identifying additional problems.

The company realizes that TQM is a long-term process, not a quick fix. It doesn't expect major results this year or even next year.

HR organization G is a contextual department; its main concern is changing contextual processes. TQM can produce desired results, but organization G isn't focused on immediate results in the way that a high-impact HR organization would be.

HR organization H. This organization offers monetary incentives to encour-

age employees to improve performance. At year's end, employees receive bonuses determined by key accomplishments by individuals or groups.

HR organization H is results-oriented (low context/high accomplishment). Interventions such as pay incentives focus exclusively on business results. The way results were achieved and what the long-term effects are don't affect bonuses.

HR organization I. A large hotel created this HR group to train its employees. A single trainer—a subject matter expert who is a hotel employee—meets with new hires on the first day of employment to discuss hotel policies and conduct a tour.

Then the trainer works alongside the new employees for one week, explaining how things should be done and providing immediate feedback. The trainer keeps a checklist to ensure that employees practice each job task at least once. At the end of the week, employees are given a performance test.

HR organization I is a results-oriented department. Its main concern is making sure employees produce job-related results. Employees are trained in the workplace, but the workplace itself—the context—isn't improved; it's just accepted.

Results-oriented training provides results-oriented service in an effective, organized way. But it also tends to perpetuate the dysfunctional aspects of the organizational context or corporate culture.

HR organization J. This organization plays a consulting role. It begins a typical intervention with a performance analysis and then delivers the necessary training.

The analysis takes into account such factors as the information given to employees, the resources they need in order to do their jobs, incentives, training, employee characteristics, and employee motivation. But the end product is a training program designed to change employee or managerial behavior.

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written, and practical tests are given to make sure the objectives are achieved. This HR organization uses sophisticated instructional technologies, based on a client's delivery situation and budget. After the training, clients can be sure that employees can perform tasks as expected.

HR organization J is also a results-oriented department. Its main

concern is making sure employees behave correctly on the job, though it does analyze several important contextual factors in its search for the right training approach. But the lack of interest in improving the context keeps the organization from using a high-impact approach.

HR organization K. This organization also serves as a consulting firm. For

example, a manager requests training because a work group produces too many defects. The situation has to change "or else." The HR staff consults with the manager and sets a goal to reduce defects by 30 percent within three months.

A project team mobilizes, made up of an accountable team leader, workers, and customers. The team sets ground rules for an effective and productive climate in which to work.

HR staff members teach a course to the project team on teamwork, quality, and performance-analysis skills. The HR staff members then serve as resource facilitators while team members analyze the defect problem to determine a root cause, plan a solution, implement the plan, and check for results. As the project proceeds, the HR people create documentation, even videotaping parts of important meetings.

When the project is completed, the team writes a report that summarizes the approach and results and makes recommendations for using similar techniques throughout the company. The documentation becomes part of a self-study program for further training.

The goal of this HR organization is continuous improvement throughout the company on a results-based, project-by-project basis.

HR organization K is a high-impact department (high context/high accomplishment). It does not try to identify every possible quality problem. Instead, its interventions focus on specific, high-priority business results, to be achieved as quickly as possible.

HR organization K identifies crisis situations and incorporates improvements to a work group's context as a natural part of the overall improvement effort. Formal skills training is provided only when the skills are about to be used. Measurable goals are set. Interventions are complete only when measurements show that desired improvements have occurred.

The groups with whom the department works get immediate reinforcement for the skills and contexts they use. So they continue to use them and encourage others to follow their lead. Last, turning the documentation into a self-study pro-

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Is Your Human Resource Department High-Impact?

Consider the improvement efforts your HR organization has instigated in the past few years. Then pick the statement in each category that is most descriptive of your organization's efforts.

In cases in which your efforts overlap several statements, select the statement that is most typical of your type of work.

1. Charter/goal: How does your organization spend most of its time? (Pick one.)

arranging or organizing programs that have been requested or brought to our attention by consultants or external suppliers (1 point)

helping people improve the efficiency and effectiveness with which they do their jobs, by focusing on skills associated with communication, teamwork, problem solving, leadership, and time management (2 points)

ensuring that people are willing and able to produce their key job accomplishments (3 points)

ensuring that people are willing and able to produce their key job accomplishments in ways that are consistent with company values and the work environment. (4 points)

2. Analysis/design: Why does your

HR organization implement productivity-improvement programs and interventions? (Pick one.)

because the programs have been requested by in-house customers (1 point)

because the programs help foster a more effective, efficient work environment (2 points)

because we have identified through performance-analysis techniques what is needed to ensure that people can produce desired results on the job (3 points)

because we have identified through various analysis techniques what is needed to ensure that people can produce desired results within a context of performance that enhances productivity. (4 points)

3. Development/implementation: Which is most true about the development and implementation of your programs? (Pick one.)

They are developed or presented by someone outside of our HR organization. (1 point)

They focus primarily on interpersonal processes, and they rely on experiential learning and the elicitation of emotional responses. (2 points)

They focus on teaching people how to do their jobs in on-the-job

settings. (3 points)

They're centered around key business accomplishments, and they enable people to practice communication and team skills while working to produce results. (4 points)

4. Evaluation/impact: How do you usually evaluate your programs' effectiveness? (Pick one.)

We monitor participants' reactions. (1 point)

We ask for peoples' reactions and administer attitude surveys. (2 points)

We measure whether people produce desired results. (3 points)

We measure whether people produce desired results in ways that are consistent with company values. (4 points)

Scoring: Count the number of points given for each of the four statements you selected, and add them up. A total score of 16 means your HR organization is completely high-impact. Lower scores indicate a need to implement more high-impact interventions by redefining charters and goals and by altering processes for analyzing and designing, developing and implementing, and evaluating interventions for performance improvement.

gram helps spread a culture of improvement.

Generally, high-impact interventions tend to revolve around a consulting approach and are supported by training as needed. HR people in a high-impact organization help employees through the process of identifying and achieving highly valued results within a performance context of guiding principles and processes.

Even if an HR organization isn't high-impact, a single high-impact project can help individual employees and work teams break through any psychological barriers to achieving performance improvement. Here are the steps involved for the HR group in a typical high-impact project:

▶ Meet with a work unit that has responsibility for a key organizational accomplishment in order to

identify a measurable, short-term goal for improving the company's bottom-line results.

▶ Help the unit establish expectations and ground rules governing such factors as conflict resolution, meeting management, and problem solving.

▶ Select and train a project team led by a person who is accountable. The team should consist of employees and customers.

▶ Serve as a resource and facilitator to help team members analyze the needs for performance and quality improvement. Help the team determine root causes to problems while maintaining the required context for performance and practicing key context-related skills.

▶ Work with team members on finding solutions, implementing a plan, and making sure the plan produces desired results quickly.

▶ At project's end, measure, document, report, and celebrate the approach and results. Make recommendations for future expansion within the company. ■

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