

Article Critique
“The Systems View of Human Performance”
by Geary A. Rummel and Alan P. Brache
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Geary A. Rummler and Alan P. Brache, authors of the article “The Systems View of Human Performance”, aim to explain performance (in three parts), offer solutions for better performance and explain needs/management.

Organization’s view of performance will determine the mission of its’ training functions, how it goes about identifying training needs, the operating components of the training function and how much impact the function will have on the organization’s performance.”

The article provides simple explanation like this quote plus many interesting issues and challenges to the common problem of appropriate training and finding tangible/productive benefits directly from training.

The authors challenge the readers by asking many questions and creating scenarios similar to real-life plus some great visual diagrams that strengthen the article’s audience base. The value of this article was high especially when call out boxes relayed special information and important quotes. They explain how individuals are connected within in the system and what needs to be done throughout the process for the system *and* individuals to be successful.

All six for success

On page 46 they write “It’s critical to understand that consistent performance is a function of all six of these variables, not five out of six” after six important bullet points on individual performance. This point accentuates the commonly known “weak link in the chain” concept which most people have experienced.

If all six factors - performance specifications, task interference, consequences, feedback, knowledge/skill and individual capacity – are completed except no one sees the feedback, then in the authors’ view, the system fails.

Many times completion of all six factors would be unrealistic in most companies, so the authors might have served the reader better by encouraging them to always strive for these six factors for the best possible results. Many companies don’t have the resources and the mental capacity/intelligence to accurately administer these six factors. The authors might serve the reader better by coming up with more great examples of instances when these six factors get ignored or even confused like the following example.

The authors’ example that “consistent performance is a function of all six ...variables, not five out of six”, on page 46, mirrored a great example discussed in class – good workers getting “rewarded” with more work. This act demonstrates how the factor of consequence does not succeed for the individual, but seemingly might for the company system. In this situation, the company sees the person as someone who has completed the task well as completing the factor

of performance specifications. The system has “adequately specified and communicated the performance” desired because the individual has produced an outstanding performance. So why not continue to give the individual work to keep the system running? “If the only noticeable consequence of being outstanding is that you get saddled with more burdens than your comparably paid peers, you’ll probably stop performing so well,” Rummler and Brache say. Employees performing at a high level under poor system processes might become disenchanted with their duties and even leave the system. Even if the system eventually finds this problem during their troubleshooting actions, it may already be too late and it might be very hard to repair the relationship between the system and the individual who has great benefit to the system.

“Let’s train them” vs. System breakdown

I strongly agree with the authors that troubleshooting is best explained in the following quote from the article “Instead of saying, ‘Let’s train them,’ we ask, ‘Where has the performance system broken down? Which components are inadequate?’” Training often is used as education thrown at the worker. The individual gets the training thanks to the company/system and it’s up to the worker to fix the problem.

Take this example from an article from Ernie Oekler’s article “Training New Employees for Productivity and Longevity on Your Farm” in an issue of a local organization newsletter, *The Buckeye Dairy News*:

Increase individual and organizational performance.

- A. Reduce adjustment problems by creating sense of security, confidence and belonging.
- B. Employees perform better because they learn faster.
- C. Employees exhibit stronger loyalty through greater commitment to values and goals.
- D. Lower absenteeism.
- E. Higher job satisfaction.

They mention organization in the title, but the focus is on the individual - no mention of the organizational environment, system or employers and their role/positive action towards the individual. The individual does not have the perspective of managers and staff working in the system. The individual does not see all the pieces that work within an organization (unless they actually work in everyone’s position for a month), so feeding them knowledge and throwing lots of training education at them doesn’t always work in theory or real life.

This example from the *Buckeye Dairy News* does not follow the two fundamental premises on page 45.

First, every individual operates within the context of a performance *system*. Second, improvements in individual and organizational performance will happen only if we understand and manage the variables in that system

Now take this abstract example from Michael R. Wade and Michael Parent’s 2002 article *Relationships Between Job Skills and Performance: A Study of Webmasters*

The main purpose of this study is to determine the mix of organizational and technical skills demanded of Webmasters, and the degree to which those skills influence job performance. The study is composed of two parts. First, a job-content analysis of 800 Webmaster positions is conducted in order to determine the mix of skills demanded of Webmasters by employers. Second, a survey of 232 Webmasters is conducted to test the relationships between those skills and job performance.

The job-content analysis suggested that employers seek technical skills over organizational skills, and, in contrast, the survey results showed that Webmasters regard organizational skills as more important in performing their jobs...

Even the individual Webmasters themselves concur to Rummler and Bache's focus on the system/organization and how it views performance!

...Structured equation modeling on the survey data showed that deficiency in both technical and organizational skills leads to lower job performance.

Moreover, the effect of organizational skill deficiencies on job performance was found to be larger than that of technical skill deficiencies. For researchers, the establishment of an empirical link between job skills and job performance opens the field to further research in the skills of information systems personnel.

For employers, the results suggest more attention should be paid to attracting organizational skills when recruiting information systems personnel, such as Webmasters.

Six practical questions

The following six questions used to determine if "a training program would make a significant difference," page 50, greatly assists the audience and provides a simple way to put these concepts into practice.

What performance output is subpar? Why need for training?

What process affects this function's performance? What process outputs are subpar?

What process step is breaking down?

Which performer in the hierarchy affects the critical process step?

What desired output of this key performer is subpar?

What is the cause of the subpar output?

If Rummler and Brache didn't write answers using their fictional insurance company example, these questions it would've been very difficult to understand. This article does a solid job of

explaining concepts in simple terms with tangible examples which demonstrates Rummler and Brache's credibility and high expertise/experience in the training/performance field.

More Rummler and Brache compared to other views

Rummler and Brache continue to stress individual and organizational performance in their book, *Improving Performance: How to Manage the White Space on the Organization Chart*, with the following quote:

The majority of managers simply do not understand the variables that influence organization and individual performance. They are not aware of the 'performance levers' that they should be pulling and encouraging others to pull.

The *Buckeye Diary News* article tends to have a simplistic, contrary view to Rummler and Brache's points. The following passages demonstrate how the concept of training seems to be above and beyond common needs:

Who ever heard of training a dairy farm employee? Don't you just hire people who already have the skills and experience that you need? Perhaps not. It appears that candidates for dairy farm jobs are increasingly less likely to have valuable experience... Good training can eliminate many mistakes. Well-trained employees have better morale and improved performance compared to those who are forced to learn from their mistakes.

In this example from the *Buckeye Diary News* article follow Rummler and Brache's concepts more closely and finally takes the organization into account of the individual's performance:

Good managers provide training for every employee, new as well as experienced ones.

Training

Loosely defined, training is any attempt to improve current or future performance by increasing employee ability. Training consists of planned programs designed to improve performance at the individual, group, and/or organizational levels. Improved performance, in turn, implies measurable changes in knowledge, skills, attitudes, and/or social behavior.

Performance must be analyzed but more importantly, everyone must discover how to do to improve it. That's where Rummler and Brache's provide valuable links in their *Improving Performance* book, especially when they explain links between Individual and Organizational Performance at the Process Level:

If you want to understand the way work gets done, to improve the way work gets done, and to manage the way work gets done, processes should be the focus of your attention and actions.

This approach is more forward-looking and less judgmental compared to a later of in the *Buckeye Dairy News* article where the author continues to ignore the performance environment. That environment – that “system” – has an enormous impact on the way people do their jobs and on the results the organization achieves.

How will we know if we've fixed it? How can we know, unless we ask what shortfall in the organization's performance has prompted this request for training?

If capable, well-trained people are placed in a setting with clear expectations, minimal task interference, reinforcing consequences, and appropriate feedback, then they will be motivated.

Conclusion

Overall, Rummler and Brache produce a very worthwhile article. The only minor document format change that would have made the points clearer (reading the first time through) would be bolding “first performer”, “next level of performer” and “third level” when explaining the three levels of performance or outputs in a hierarchy on page 47.

Any reader could find at least some value in the text, though the reading level may be a bit high for some people. Luckily the authors provide helpful visual aids which increase the retainability of the article and the reader's understanding of the concepts. For example, on page 48, Figure 3 has a great help in understanding the concept presented at the beginning in the first column of text. Without the figure, it would've been harder to visualize the organizational relationships, inputs/outputs and processing system discussed in the text. Rummler and Brache explain presented processes, including action, consequences, analysis, feedback, process, results and input, very well and give great examples of each process concept. Unlike this article, written in 1990, Rummler and Brache cite specific examples of real world examples in their book, *Improving Performance: How to Manage the White Space on the Organization Chart*. The increased amount of text in a book would certainly warrant more support and reasonings behind their examples and concepts, but the strong, creative examples in this article have just as much relevance as most real world examples would, plus the concepts in the article are more condensed so examples should be generalized so the reader can fully understand.

Bibliography

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