Recovery From Occupational Schizophrenia

What's in a name? In a profession searching for its identity, what we call our work makes a difference in how we are perceived. Consider the case for performance technology.

By Gloria Regalbuto

A professional dilemma: who are we? Do those of us who train and develop individuals in the workplace make up a profession? Are we technicians? Are we practitioners?

Whatever your answer, it's clear we suffer from an occupational schizophrenia that impedes our gaining attention and respect from our organizations and co-workers.

Yes, we are a profession. Yes, we have a common mission and we have a broad range of tools or "technologies" to draw upon to achieve that mission. What we lack is a unified understanding of who we are and what we do. We lack a common terminology and, consequently, a unified identity.

One reason for the disconnectedness of our practitioners relates to individual preferences for particular technologies; another relates to a lack of willingness to expand our professional skills.

Few topics generate as much vehement debate as the professionalizing of the field. One view holds that we aren't a profession at all. Many who are involved in workplace training and development don't think of themselves as members of the field of training and development but as members of the field in which they have subject matter expertise.

For example, people with educational background in the health professions who teach hospital employees generally think of themselves as health professionals who happen to do training. People who supply computer user support by giving instruction in various software packages will not see themselves as a trainers but as programmers or data processing specialists.

Few individuals who enter the field of training and development through their expertise in some other specialty will see themselves as trainers. Even fewer identify with the words human resource development, or HRD.

Because of that, it can be difficult for people who practice in the field to gain access to information about the training and development aspects of their responsibilities. They do not join professional societies having to do with HRD; instead they affiliate with groups representing their primary professional identity. For example, a health care worker might join the American Hospital Association; an engineer would choose the American Society of Mechanical Engineers. In short, training and development is a role they fill within their professions, not a profession in itself.

We lack a unified understanding of who we are and what we do

If we are a profession, what do we call ourselves?

The jargon used by those who see themselves as training and development or HRD professionals is, in itself,

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a barrier to entrance to the field. Especially heated discussions take place over preferred occupational titles. Here are some of the choices.

- human resource development specialist
- integrated human resource systems specialist
- instructional technologist
- instructional systems designer
- organizational behaviorist
- career developer
- vocational educator
- employer-based trainer
- training specialist
- organizational developer
- professional developer
- technical trainer
- management developer
- instructional media specialist
- performance technologist.

It doesn't take much pondering to realize that this inability to define ourselves contributes to our lack of recognition as a profession.

A cursory look at any newspaper advertisement for a training and development position offers strong evidence that employing organizations have no consistent idea of who we are. Ads ask for trainers and teachers or any of the titles listed above and then may require educational background or experience in education, business, communications, human resources—even journalism. In fact, a case can be made that the lack of a clear identity is a reason for the field to suffer from low self-esteem.

Does our work define us or do our tools?

Each of the occupational descriptions mentioned above does represent a certain skewness in the kinds of functions a person performs on the job. Each implies a slightly different set of tools that might be applied to obtain results. Each occupational title is held in special favor by those who prefer the use of one tool over another in their work, but it is the goal of the work we do that holds us to membership in a common profession.

While we may use any available tool to achieve our mission, the fact that practitioners prefer the use of one tool over another does not mean they are members of separate fields, although they may be considered specialists.

Unfortunately, this perception of separate fields is reinforced by the existence of a broad array of professional organizations that focus on a single tool: The Society for Advanced Learning Technology focuses on high-tech, computer-based instructional delivery systems; The Association for Computer Training Support serves trainers in data processing software; the Midwest Nuclear Trainers Association is for people engaged in training and development in nuclear utilities.

Rather than continue with this dispersed model, our profession is better compared to medicine, in which all members are physicians, but some are orthopedists, some are neurologists, others are endocrinologists, and so on.

What is the work we do?

If we are a profession, we have a specific mission, goal, or outcome in common. I believe our common mission is to manage, improve, or enhance performance in the workplace.

Because such a mission encompasses all the tools of the trade, in my view, the most appropriate descriptor of that work is performance technology.

Some people may argue that we're after more than the management of performance in the workplace. Aren't we also concerned with the development of knowledge workers or with enhancing the quality of working life and with total quality? But all of these goals can, and for practical purposes, *must* be reduced to the term "performance."

Knowledge and quality of working life exist as internal individual states and can only be observed and measured in terms of visible behavior, in other words, performance. For example, a worker who experiences poor quality of working life may quit, or speak to co-workers or to an employee relations officer about job dissatisfaction. These are all physically observable actions—performance.

Focus on performance

Observable performance is the only measure of competence or satisfaction. Observable performance is the only thing we can actually deal with, manipulate, manage, or influence as professionals.

Many practitioners are uncomfortable with an emphasis on behavior or performance, thinking it applies only to manufacturing or production work. Some ask, "What about knowledge workers? What does performance technology have to do with them?"

Bob Mager, who has had a significant influence on the growth of performance technology, is quite direct on this point.

In an interview in the July 1990 issue of *Training* magazine, he said, "To say that people have to be able to think—it's just such a general statement that you can't respond to it . . . the fact is that the world is operated by people who can do things. When people can't do things that they need to be able to do in order to function, then somebody has to help them out. It's obvious, I suppose, that people need to think, but I can't deal with that because I don't know what that means. It's too fuzzy."

Of course, thinking must be affected in order to create competence, performance, and fulfillment. That is part of the work. However, it is not something that we can access and affect in the way that we can affect performance.

The term "performance" encompasses any behavior that is observable, such as the performance of a set task, self-reports, and responses in paper and pencil surveys. Changes in these observable performances are the only clues a practitioner has to determine whether the use of a particular tool has had an effect.

Expanding our functional role

The emphasis on changing performance has a profound effect on the ways in which we practice our profession. Instead of assuming that all performance is related to the presence or absence of certain skills and knowledge, we must now ask, "Why is the worker not performing in the expected way?" In other words, we must engage in what is the key to performance technology: performance or front-end analysis.

One cause of a performance gap is a lack of skill or knowledge. But many other possibilities relate to what many refer to as the "M"s of performance analysis: problems with raw materials (which are the input for the performance); insufficient money (the project is underfunded); insufficient manpower and womanpower (not enough labor to achieve the expected productivity level); inadequate machinery or equipment needed to do the job; poorly designed work methods; or insufficient motivation ("They don't pay me enough to work like this!").

The professional performance technologist examines the system in which the performance exists in order to track down the cause or causes of the problem. The tool to be used—the particular technology—will then be determined from this analysis—not the other way around.

We may not have specific expertise in the application of interventions to each of these problems, but our responsibility to improve performance requires that we address each issue as a standard professional activity.

We see ourselves as others see us

A difficulty in expanding our activities in this way often comes from the management of the organizations we work for. Traditionally, we have used classroom training as our only intervention, so employers have come to expect classroom training to be our only activity. In fact, the performance of most training managers is based on the numbers of employees trained and not on the effectiveness of that training in improving performance.

Why should we rock the boat? The problem is that our economic boats are all adrift in a competitive storm. If we don't assert our ability to use the tools we have available to us, we may go under.

As professionals, we have a responsibility to deliver what's needed, not just what's wanted. At the least we should give our employers the benefit of our best judgment about what's needed. To do otherwise is to deny the efficacy of our profession and to risk failure. The application of an inappropriate tool can often cause more harm than good.

For instance, a training manager in a large, household glassware manufacturing corporation was asked to deliver training to the workers who inspected the finished product at the end of the manufacturing line and then packed the product in boxes for shipment. The supervisor of the inspectors asked the training manager to design a course in "glass defect identification." The reason? Quality control inspectors had been setting aside defective glassware representing hours of production.

The amount of defective glassware was excessive and created significant losses in re-work and scrapped ware. The plant was losing money because of poor inspection.

The easiest course of action for the training manager would have been to design and deliver a class in defect identification. That would have been

he appropriate solution if the glassware inspectors did not know how to identify defects.

However, before assuming that lack of skill or knowledge was the source of the problem, this performance technologist chose to engage in some performance analysis first. She went into the plant and interviewed the glassware inspectors, asking such questions as, "What kinds of difficulties do you run into when you're doing your job?" "If you could change anything about your job to make it better, what would you do?" The cause of the poor quality of inspection became evident within a few hours.

The problem was defined best by one of the inspectors. When asked, "What kinds of problems do you encounter when you're doing your job?" he answered, "See the red button at the end of the work station? You're supposed to hit that button if something goes wrong with the line and a supervisor is supposed to come right out and fix it. I've been mashing on that button for twenty years, but ain't nobody come out here and changed these light bulbs."

A glance across the plant floor made it obvious that it was just too dark to see. Another worker said, "I could take this glassware out in the receiving yard and inspect it better than I can do it in here!"

Follow-up investigation uncovered a series of grievances filed by union members about the poor quality of the lighting. Many worker's compensation claims had been filed involving eye strain and headaches. The training manager calculated the amount of money lost to scrap and rework and discovered that it was more than enough to pay for a lighting consultant to redesign the workstations.

Certainly, the training manager could have satisfied the supervisor's request by designing a defect identification program—but the results could well have led to a wildcat strike. Nothing infuriates workers more than struggling with daily barriers to performance and then being told they don't know how to do their jobs!

Enhanced skills and broadened role definitions.

The tool kit for our practitioners is broad and varied. This is a cause for celebration, not schizophrenia. Because a performance technologist puts emphasis on performance and not on the tools used to affect it, a performance technologist can be defined in terms of the outcomes he or she desires. If the goal of the profession is to improve and enhance performance, it is legitimate to use any tool that can make that happen.

Some performance technologists call these tools interventions. They include, but are not limited to, the following:

- classroom training
- structured on-the-job training
- coaching
- job aids
- workstation redesign
- job redesign
- job enrichment
- career pathing
- succession planning
- human factors or industrial engineering techniques
- organizational development

■ employee compensation and benefits planning
■ employee assistance programs.

In short, anything is a legitimate technology if it promises to remove potential barriers to performance that have been identified in front-end or performance analysis. This expands immensely the purview of the practitioner in the field.

Performance technology threatens some

Some practitioners fear that performance technology demands too much of them. It is much simpler to see oneself as a teacher designing and delivering training. But if a lack of skills or knowledge is not the reason for a performance gap, training will have little or no effect.

Training is not the hammer to every performance nail. As the glassware manufacturing example makes clear, training workers to do jobs for which they already possess adequate skills and knowledge can have damaging effects.

In order to become a performance technologist, a practitioner must be willing to go beyond traditional tools and expand his or her repertoire. A barrier to making this transition is the additional professional development required to perform in an environment that demands more than one is accustomed to.

Responding to demand

It may appear to some that this is a lot of verbiage about a semantic issue, but it is not so simple. If this is a word game, it is one in which the stakes are nothing less than the skills of the workforce. Our profession has, rightfully, staked a claim around our unique ability to apply our technology to change performance in the workplace. We have earned the right to make this claim because our technologies have been proved to be effective.

Performance improvement cannot come from classroom training alone. Such a result calls for the best front-end analysis techniques we can apply and the best interventions we can design. It requires that we all work hard to expand our tool kits and stretch beyond the interventions with which we are most comfortable. Practitioners who rely on one tool alone will likely find themselves in the same position as a cathode-ray tube engineer in a world full of microchips.

The key: our own professional development

In our competitive environment, practitioners in the field can ill afford to train without results—changes in performance. Unfortunately, indecently low self-esteem causes a certain paralysis in many practitioners in our field. We may not feel adequate to the tasks at hand.

This is no time for hesitation. There is no reason for it. The tools of performance technology work; we only need to have the courage to move beyond our traditional comfort zones and apply them. It would be ironic and disastrous if we, of all professionals, lost our ability to perform because we feared to add to our own skills or thought we were beyond the need for continuing professional development. ■