

What is HPT?

A Practitioner's View

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This paper examines some answers to the question that serves as its title. It does so from the perspective of a long-time practitioner and contributor to the field. It also presents a performance engineering model that serves to frame the practice of HPT.

What is HPT?

HPT stands for Human Performance Technology so the question is, “What is Human Performance Technology?” That question is presumably answerable by a statement beginning with “Human Performance Technology is...”

Some Answers

The International Society for Performance Improvement (ISPI) is home to HPT and ISPI’s web site poses the question and offers several answers to it:

- a systematic approach to improving productivity and competence
- a process of selection, analysis, design, development, implementation, and evaluation of programs to most cost-effectively influence human behavior and accomplishment
- a systematic combination of three fundamental processes: performance analysis, cause analysis, and intervention selection
- a set of methods and procedures, and a strategy for solving problems, for realizing opportunities related to the performance of people
- the systematic and systemic identification and removal of barriers to individual and organizational performance

From my perspective as a long-time practitioner and contributor, I think there are two basic answers to the question:

- (1) HPT is an area of professional practice and
- (2) HPT is a body of knowledge.

In particular, HPT is a body of knowledge with roots in both the hard and soft sciences. Moreover, this body of knowledge focuses on practical application, making it a technology.

HPT as an Area of Professional Practice

As an area of professional practice, HPT focuses on improving the performance of people in the workplace. That suggests a requirement to say something about what is meant by “performance” as the term applies to people. Frankly, I like what I wrote more than 30 years ago (Nickols, 1977):

“Performance, as I view it, is defined by the outcomes of behavior. Behavior is individual activity, whereas the outcomes of behavior are the ways in which the behaving individual’s environment is somehow different as a result of his or her behavior (p.14).”

Reinforcing that view of performance is something Thomas Gilbert (1974) wrote:

“If you stop to think about it, then, it is only the accomplishments of performance that we value – never the behaviors that produce them (p.13).”

Gilbert’s notion of “accomplishments” is consistent with if not identical with the notion of “outcomes” and what Gilbert Ryle (1949) meant much earlier with his notion of “achievements.” In any case, there is value in distinguishing between behavior and performance.

However, human performance is often linked to other kinds of performance (e.g., process, group, unit and organizational performance) and, consequently, the practice of HPT can also make its way through the linkages that connect human performance to these other kinds of performance and lead to efforts and improvements in these other areas as well.

HPT as a Body of Knowledge or Technology

Viewed as a body of knowledge, HPT consists of a set of concepts, principles and practices, including tools, methods and techniques that have practical application in improving human performance. In the hands of a competent HPT practitioner, this body of knowledge offers a practical, time-tested, proven and systematic approach to improving the performance and productivity of individuals, groups and organizations.

HPT Doesn't Do Anything, Its Practitioners Do

What do HPT practitioners do? They improve the performance of people, processes and organizations.

How do they do that? They partner with their clients to analyze the situation; to figure out why it is the way it is; to identify ways of improving upon it; to put these improvements in place; and to verify the results. In short, they work with the clients to figure out what to do, determine how to get it done, and to actually get it done.

What tools do they use? That depends. HPT includes a very large tool box. The more experienced and skilled the practitioners the more tools they can use and the better they can use them.

HPT Doesn't Provide Any Benefits, Its Practitioners Do

Any benefits from HPT are provided by HPT practitioners, typically working in a collaborative or partnering way with their clients. Owing to this “working together” aspect of the practice of HPT, many engagements in which HPT comes into play are at least in part self-help efforts and almost always involve some transfer of HPT know-how to the client. The general benefits that these efforts yield typically take the form of improved performance of people, processes and the organization itself. More specifically, these benefits can take the form of increased productivity, reduced costs, reduced error rates, increased sales, improved quality, shortened cycle times, reduced staffing requirements, shortened learning curves, reduced training time and costs and just about any other kind of business or organizational benefit you can imagine.

What Sets HPT Practitioners Apart?

What sets HPT practitioners apart? First and foremost, is the HPT practitioner's focus and insistence on obtaining valid evidence of the nature and extent of any improvements realized and that, of course, ties to a data-based, evidence-oriented approach (in particular, data and evidence that are meaningful to the client). Another thing that sets them apart is their grasp of the nature of human performance and the important distinction between human performance and human behavior. A third thing that sets them apart is their knowledge of the links between human performance and other areas of performance, especially the fabled “bottom line.” Finally, unlike many consultants who simply drop a

report on their client's desk and walk away, HPT practitioners roll up their sleeves and get involved in implementing the solutions they work out in concert with their clients.

People are at the Heart of All Performance

What should not escape notice here is that all kinds of performance, whether of processes, functions, departments or organizations, tie eventually to the performance of people, either as individuals or in groups large or small.

Performance improvement efforts that begin with a focus on human performance often tie to and lead to other kinds of performance (e.g., process or operational and even financial performance). Similarly, performance improvement efforts that begin with process or operational or financial performance often tie to and lead to the performance of people.

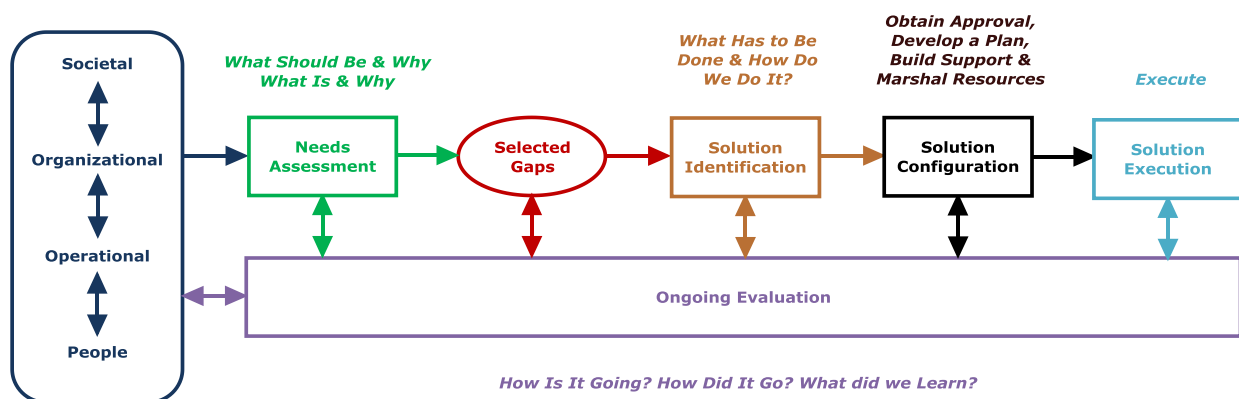
Consequently, it is difficult to envision any kind of performance improvement effort that cannot benefit from the application of HPT at one point or another.

Performance Can be Engineered

If there is a central tenet in HPT, it is that performance can be engineered, that the requisite conditions for a particular performance can be determined and established. These conditions can then serve as a guide to diagnosis or as a guide to design, making it possible to solve problems of human performance and to engineer it as well.

A Performance Engineering Model

When I try visualizing the process by which performance can be engineered, I come up with the diagram below:



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Description

The model illustrates four levels of performance: societal, organizational, operational and people (individuals and groups). The action begins with an assessment of required and realized performance,

what some people refer to as “what should be” and “what is.” This assessment can be undertaken at any level of performance (individual, operational, organizational or societal). It can encompass more than one level or it can encompass all four levels. It can also begin at the bottom and work upward or it can begin at the top and work its way down. It can even begin in the middle and fan out in both directions. Decisions regarding how many levels of performance to include, where to start, and how to proceed are affected by many factors; in particular, the restraints and constraints under which the analysis is being conducted. In all cases and at all levels, the analyses of required and realized performance are expressed in terms of results, not conditions or resources or activities.

With the assessment of required and realized performance in hand, any gaps between the two can be identified, some of which can be selected for resolution. The world is full of gaps or discrepancies between the way things are and the way we would like them to be. Not all gaps are worth bothering with and there aren't enough resources to address all the gaps we might consider important. We must be selective. Some of the factors to consider in selecting gaps for resolution include the following:

- The cost of the gap itself
- The payoffs of closing the gap
- The costs of closing the gap
- The likelihood of successfully closing the gap
- The time it will take to close the gap
- The kinds of resources required to close the gap

Once a gap has been selected for resolution, attention turns to engineering a solution, devising a course of action that will close the gap. In many cases, closing a gap requires changing some aspects of the situation in which the gap manifests itself. Two factors are central here: (1) what has to change and (2) how can those things be changed. This is almost always the case when the aim is to improve upon existing arrangements. On occasion, a gap in results occurs because brand-new goals or targets have been set. There are no existing arrangements. Here, the task at hand is to design and build a performance system that will yield the desired results.

Identifying a solution is only part of the engineering task. Approval must be obtained; a plan must be developed; resources must be marshaled and support must be garnered. All this is by way of preparation for implementation or execution.

Assuming everything is ready (or at least as ready as it can be) attention turns to execution, to implementing the identified solution.

The model shows evaluation as what some might call the last step. However, evaluation is an ongoing process. The two-way arrows between evaluation and the other boxes indicate that this part of the process is iterative and that subsequent steps can “feed back” and affect earlier ones. This is especially true in situations where circumstances and conditions are dynamic, fluid and ever-changing. So, evaluation is being conducted all along the way. Early on, evaluation is for the purpose of keeping track of how things are going, and where necessary, adjusting and adapting so as to keep things on track.

Once the effort is completed, the focus of evaluation turns to how things turned out and what was learned.

Is That All There Is?

Yes. Certainly more detail could be provided but it would necessarily take the form of this author's experiences and preferences. Much is known about how to carry out the steps and stages of the model shown in Figure 1. Entire books have been written about the subject. Moreover, there are many capable HPT practitioners who have their own notions about how these stages should be carried out. There is available a wealth of information, tools, methods and techniques related to HPT and the art, craft and science of engineering performance. My goal here is simply to frame the practice of performance engineering in a way that will provide a common mental model on which many HPT practitioners might agree and still leave room for them to practice their craft and further develop and refine the practice.

Contact

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