

Extending the Reach of Instructional Technologists

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This article was co-authored with Bill Buxton, the fellow who gave me my first job after leaving the Navy. It was published in *Performance & Instruction* in 1976 and it represents a much condensed and revised version of a presentation Bill and I made at the 13th Annual NSPI Conference in Washington, D.C. That presentation was titled "Extending Your Reach: Instructional Technology as Organization Development." Its suggestions to instructional technologists (read "trainers") are as sound today as they were almost 25 years ago when we first posed them.

A Job Done too Well?

Instructional technologists have done a very good job of defining just what is and what isn't a training problem. Unfortunately, they may have done that job too well. Because of their insistence upon proper problem labeling and their own strong sense of identity as trainers, many instructional technologists seem to be boxing themselves into very narrow roles within their organizations. Some managers already consider most instructional technologists as very limited resources (i.e., suitable only for that rarest of species – a genuine training problem).

Others (e.g., organization development specialists, classical management consultants, and some few performance technologists) have been willing to accept a wide range of problems as appropriate for their skills, without being as insistent as instructional technologists upon proper problem labeling. These people tend to be well salaried, close to top management, and provided with access to high priority organizational problems (things many instructional technologists frequently complain of not having).

The issue is not whether instructional technologists could or should become full-time OD practitioners, management consultants, or even performance technologists. Rather, the suggestion is that those NSPIers identifying themselves as instructional technologists can and should extend their reach – that is, widen management's view of the applicability of instructional technology and the value of instructional technologists. For if these NSPIers do become boxed in" they will never receive the accord they deserve and organizations may be deprived of a very powerful technology for change and improvement.

It is probably true that most instructional technologists in NSPI already possess the skills required to extend their reach; specifically, the skills required to derive, define and achieve measurable outcomes. As a generalized example, consider the phenomenon of resistance to change. There are many instances of resistance to change in the everyday lives of NSPIers: resistance to change prevents managers from dealing with performance problems the way they should be tackled; resistance to change puts some of the best efforts of NSPIers on the shelf; resistance to change makes the implementation of solutions more difficult; and resistance to change maintains the status quo in training and education.

On the other hand, consider the possibility that resistance to change is a myth; that is, people do not resist change per se – they resist what they see as the *aversive consequences* of change. The consequences of change that people resist are those they perceive as negative: those with the prospect of punishment. Viewed this way, the so-called irrational issue of resistance to change becomes the rational issue of identifying outcomes. When the outcomes are clear, it's also clear whether the punishing aspects of the proposed change are real or imagined. If imagined, the basis for resistance is gone. If real, then one knows what has to be addressed in order to effect the desired change.

Applying the basic skill of clarifying and defining outcomes is central to the idea of extending the reach of instructional technologists. There are also a number of other, more specific ways in

which NSPIers can reach out, expanding their contribution to their organizations and realizing the expanded inducements of doing so. Here are some suggestions.

Suggestions for Extending Your Reach

Don't Shut the Door on Opportunity

For the internal staffer or the external consultant, the handling of the earliest contacts with the client can foster or preclude extending one's reach. Instructional technologists might do well to buy in to problems on their client's terms instead of their own terms. Buying in on the client's terms means two things: (1) being willing to help, and (2) recognizing that help is defined by the person receiving it, not the person giving it. Both of these things come together in the way one responds to requests for help. For example, suppose the Chief Executive Officer says that labor relations are bad and he wants a briefing for all employees to "explain the benevolence of the company's management and its policies." A professional instructional technologist could respond by explaining in detail just why that's a benighted solution for an important problem. But it might be better to say, "Right. I'll be glad to help with the labor relations problem. One of the ways I can help is in pinning down the desired results of this briefing. So, could you tell me how you'll know the briefing has been successful?"

One of the best measures of a person's perceived usefulness is the frequency with which s/he is called upon for help. Such requests constitute opportunities to make a contribution. The way a person responds to those requests determines whether or not s/he will get additional and/or expanded opportunities.

Don't Talk About It – Do It

A person can also close the door on many opportunities if s/he spends a lot of time trying to sell his/her methods or legitimize his/her processes. If a technology is useful or helpful, then don't waste time trying to sell it – put it to work on the client's problem. If the client thinks it is useful, then the technology or technique will sell itself.

Suppose a manager says he wants a supervisory program on motivation because morale is low. Since morale and motivation are two of the all-time great fuzzies, an instructional technologist could say, "Come back when you've got something concrete to work on." Or s/he could say, "You don't need a supervisory program; you need a front-end analysis, or a performance analysis, or a needs assessment." The technologist might even say something like, "There's no such thing as motivation." However, the instructional technologist might be seen as more helpful if s/he were to say, "Sure thing. Now, in order to really get this morale thing taken care of, we'll need some ways to tell when that's happened. Can you tell me what you see that indicates morale is low?"

All that's being said here is that instructional technologists should spend more time *applying* their technology and less time *explaining* it. A person's ultimate credibility rests on his/her ability to produce results, not describe how they're produced.

Actively Seek Non-Training Assignments

This means reaching out for the kinds of projects that wouldn't ordinarily fit the standard definition of a training problem. This approach starts with the first point (not shutting the door on opportunity) and extends to seeking out new ways to be of service. Three areas where instructional technologists can reach out are: fuzzies, one-shot programs, and proactive problem solving.

Fuzzies are really just performance problems that haven't yet been clearly defined. Attitudes, morale, values, motivation, interpersonal relations, and most problems in the affective domain are fuzzies. Instructional technologists should take on more of the fuzzy assignments and plan on using their skills in analysis *while they are helping*, so the problem can eventually be defined in measurable terms. But don't rule out assignments just because they start out fuzzy. (And keep a copy of Bob Mager's *Goal Analysis* handy.)

Instructional technologists should take on one-shot programs, too. Much of instructional technology is geared to the creation of relatively permanent systems: texts that can be used for years, basic skill training that can be used over and over, and education and training for large numbers of people over a long period of time. But many of the problems facing organizations don't fit that repeated-use model. The critical changes in an organization are much more likely to be one-shot efforts. The launching of a new product, the creation of a new department, or the development of a new business system are all one-time training problems. There may be continuing training requirements for maintenance purposes, but the changeover only occurs once. NSPIers skills in task analysis and performance analysis are admirably suited to such projects. And if NSPIers decline to tackle those problems, there are others waiting in the wings who are more than willing.

An integral part of tackling one-shot programs is the idea of taking a proactive approach to problems. Reactive approaches tackle problems *after* they've occurred – absenteeism and turnover are up, production and profits are down. Proactive approaches represent advance troubleshooting; problem prevention instead of problem correction. For example, when a new system is being launched, the training people could wait until it's operational and then design corrective training measures. On the other hand, they could also do the training work before the fact rather than after the fact, using their skills to predict the future and head off problems *before* they occur. Needs assessment, for example, is not limited just to training applications nor to corrective problem-solving – it is a generic planning and problem-solving tool (Refer to Roger Kaufman's *Educational System Planning* for some excellent ideas about needs assessment).

Cut Corners in the Process

This suggestion follows from the first three (and it's also implicit in the fact that no one lives in a "constraint-free" environment). It means being willing to stray from the model of the right way of doing things whenever it's functional to do so. As an example, consider the validation of instructional materials. Would any program worth its salt skimp on validation? Of course it would, under certain conditions. Validation is carried out to (1) ensure results, (2) ensure the repeatability of results, and (3) develop lean programs that keep trainee time and training costs at a minimum. But suppose it's a one-shot program. What's critical then is something that will produce results once, within what is probably very limited lead-time. Repeatability simply isn't needed, and adhering to the concept of leanness is often less important than the requirement to meet project deadlines. The implication is not that instructional technologists must choose between their organization's operational requirements and their own professional requirements; what the notion of cutting corners does imply is that instructional technologists should tailor their technology to fit the situation rather than tailoring the situation to fit their technology.

At one time (not so long ago) instructional technologists took a lot of flak for straying from accepted educational and instructional models. That willingness to stray from the right and proper path has been pretty useful: it got NSPIers where they are today, and it's pretty likely to take them wherever they're going.

Summary

All problems are human performance problems of one kind or another, regardless of how they're labeled. This means the skills possessed by many instructional technologists should enable them to do something about almost any kind of problem – provided they can gain access to the situation. Gaining that access requires that instructional technologists exercise initiative and ingenuity, and display a willingness to accept a wide range of problems as appropriate for their skills.

However, if instructional technologists impose the aesthetic requirements of instructional technology as a constraint on the contribution they make to their organizations, then those same technologists will most likely suffer the constraints the organization will place on the value of their technology and on its application (i.e., instructional technologists will have to learn to live with being seen as very limited resources).

Some of the ways instructional technologists can avoid being stuck in limited organizational roles include capitalizing on existing opportunities to apply instructional technology, seeking out new opportunities to demonstrate the value of their technology, and adapting their technology to fit whatever situation presents itself. In this way, NSPIers can expand the organizational clout of instructional technology and *extend their reach* as instructional technologists.

About the Authors

For many years Bill Buxton was Principal of MDS, a consulting practice that is "older than dirt," as he describes it. His professional roots dated back to some of the earliest applications of instructional technology in business. However, as evident in this article, he was more accurately described as a business problem solver than as a technologist of one stripe or another. His clients were large and small, private and public, military and civilian organizations. Sadly, Bill passed away a few years ago.

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