

The Future of Performance

The consensus is that there's a growing emphasis on "performance" in organizations. But other than more focus on performance issues, what does the future hold for human performance improvement and consulting? What changes can we expect with HPI and how it's applied within work settings? We look at the trends and likely future developments as seen by a range of acknowledged leaders in the performance field.

What does the future hold for the performance field? That's an important question to ponder.

It's clear that human performance improvement is growing as a key focus area for organizations and for our profession. ASTD's State of the Industry Report says that performance is gaining increasing visibility and emphasis. ISPI (International Society for Performance and Improvement), in *Performance Xpress Trendspotters*, interviewed many experts who see tremendous growth and importance in the performance consulting arena. The *T+D* article "Eight Trends You Need to Know Now" (January 2004) found that a major development for HRD professionals is the need to be more business-aware and focused—in other words, "performance-oriented."

So, a lot of key players are saying that performance is a growth field—and that if you aren't in it, you need to be.

But to know that an area or focal point will grow and become more important isn't enough; it's important to know more about how the growth will occur.

- How will performance consulting change?
- How will the performance field be different in 10 years?
- What new developments will performance professionals see?
- What will those already in the performance field need to prepare for?

Fifteen Who Know

I asked 15 veteran performance consultants for their insights about where the field is headed. These people make up a stellar list of performance leaders. Among them are nine tours of service on the ASTD or ISPI board of directors, 30 books on the field, and major awards for their contributions to the field. All are active contributors to the practice and study of performance. After talking with them, I looked for common threads in their comments. What follows are the themes that emerged from these conversations. The perspectives range from optimistic to pessimistic, but no one came off as either a "cheerleader" or a "curmudgeon." I promised

By Joe Willmore

anonymity, and I thank them for their time, wisdom, and candor.

Noted performance artist Laurie Anderson on her album “Bright Red” posed the question: “What I really want to know is this: Are things getting better, or are they getting worse?”

That’s a good question to ask from a performance perspective in trying to figure out where HPI is today. The veteran performance consultants I spoke with say, “Better.” All 15 agree that performance is growing in visibility, executives are placing more emphasis on accountability for results by HR professionals, and trainers have more interest in performance improvement. There was a strong consensus that work environments are placing greater importance on improving performance and are providing opportunities for performance consultants to shine.

That said, my group has observed more specific developments. Eight themes emerged.

1. Faster, faster!

There’s plenty of evidence that the world is moving at a faster pace and that organizations are demanding solutions yesterday. That has significant implications for performance consultants. One of the more traditional laments from those who don’t understand how the performance process works is, “How am I going to get the time to do all that front-end analysis and ROI?”

The HPI process doesn’t have to be slow and laborious. Allison Rossett in *First Things Fast* demonstrates a range of ways to speed up analysis work. But as time pressure continues to increase in organizations, performance consultants will need to find ways to accelerate work further. Says one of my group, “Performance consultants need to find ways to accelerate the front-end process, to do it quicker than we do today.” The experts I talked with say it’s more than just being efficient, that the need is to consistently improve the speed with which performance work is done.

2. Leadership or coup?

One of the more controversial positions taken by a surprising number of the performance leaders I spoke with had to do with who would ultimately “own” the performance field in the next 10 years. Many said that though performance was growing in popularity and organizational demand, that didn’t mean performance work would continue to reside primarily within the HRD community. Though the training and ISD

communities may have helped increase visibility on performance, ultimately it will move outside of HRD because too many in the profession aren’t moving beyond a transactional mindset.

Here are some of their comments:

- “The people who’ve initiated this won’t be able to maintain ownership of [the performance function].”
- “The performance movement in HR is weak—lots of talk but low movement. That’s because the people in the roles are the wrong people.”
- “I think 10 years from now we’ll see much more emphasis on performance. We’ll see more organizations that have pervasive performance cultures. But the HRD functions will retreat in those cases to fulfill requests rather than play performance roles.”
- “If we aren’t careful, we’re going to see performance-focused opportunities grow in companies, but the people leading the performance efforts won’t be in any of the roles we recognize today. We’re in danger of letting the revolution pass us by.”
- “The HR community may get left out of this [performance] equation.”

So, if there’s a risk that HR and HRD may cease to play a major role in performance, who or where would HPI migrate to? The most common answer was, “line management.”

- “A decade from now, most of these approaches will be part of MBA programs.”
- “The performance approach is migrating to the line. An early trend is that line managers are more systemic, less likely to jump to conclusions.”
- “Internal performance consultants will be integrated into business lines and report to department directors or general managers.”
- “We’ll facilitate management’s use of the performance improvement tools.”

In short, it’s possible that while the outlook for performance is rosy, there’s not necessarily a consensus that the HR community will remain players within performance work.

3. Get strategic, or be outsourced.

Performance work draws the interest of HRD professionals because of the ability to demonstrate improvement of the target population or closure of a performance gap. But most of the performance gurus I spoke with addressed the need for those engaging in performance work to stop viewing it as an effort to improve the capacity of performers. The focus needs

to increasingly be on business results (Kirkpatrick's Level 4 and Phillips's Level 5). Some performance consultants operate on those levels already, but the majority of my group think almost all performance work will move to those levels.

Read their comments:

- "It's not enough for there to be a performance gap. If we're not focusing primarily on business goals and business results, then it won't be supported in the future."
- "Transactional work (fulfilling requests) will be outsourced, automated, or provided through a shared services center. Tactical work will mostly be outsourced. Strategic work, driven by key business priorities...only that won't be outsourced."
- "If performance really does start to pervade the organizational culture, then you stop needing performance consultants to do smaller business unit problems. The only real case for job security comes from identifying and working with senior management on the biggest goals for the business."

4. New content

The performance consultants I spoke with uniformly think that the basic principles and fundamentals of HPI are solid and will stand the test of time. They also strongly agree that new content will continue to emerge. However, there was no consensus on what that content might be.

The area that drew the most support for new developments revolved around technology—in the analysis of technological performance, as well as the use of technology as a tool by performance consultants. Some in my group argued for more refinement in the evaluation area; others felt the new content would develop in areas traditionally outside of human performance that are relevant to organizational performance. Still others said that as more research was done into physical and psychological behavior, those insights would continue to shape the performance consulting field.

Here are some of their comments:

- "We've just begun to analyze the technological implications for performance."
- "We'll see dramatic changes in how it's all pulled together."
- "As Western economies deal with shrinking workforces, the focus on performance will shift from maximizing productivity to automation."

- "I think evaluation is just starting to grow as a content area."

● "Right now, HPI draws too many lines. It excludes things that are too relevant to business results. We're going to start seeing performance consultants who deal with issues that have nothing to do with human performance."

● "The more we understand about how human beings function—how our minds work, how we deal with pain and anger, our aspirations, our physical limitations—the more the field of performance consulting will continue to grow."

An additional issue that drew different positions from the gurus had to do with the area of making the transition into performance work. That was identified as a key growth content area. Comments were that the performance field was still naïve on how to guide departments, performers, and consultants into performance roles and that the next five years would see new depth in this area of performance. As one performance leader noted, "We give people the skills to do performance work and assume that's enough to make them performance consultants. What's wrong with that picture?"

5. What are we selling?

With the growth and increasing visibility of HPI, the challenge among many newly minted performance consultants (especially internal practitioners) is how to market to clients what it is they do. As one of the consultants in my group noted, "We need to be able to explain to middle and top management, in terms they will understand, not only the benefits of HPI, but also the cost—not in dollars but in resources, time, and changes in the way the organization does things."

There are several pieces to this issue. One concern, a traditional one, is that we in the performance field need to do a better job selling HPI to clients and management and to find better ways to explain what performance is. The group of performance leaders says that's an issue, but for them, as senior practitioners with credibility, publications, and track records, it isn't one personally. Some in my group said that until it's clear what HPI is, it's hard to position the marketing. ASTD/ISPI's certification program, for example, was cited by two of the experts as a future answer to the marketing dilemma: "The CPT [certification performance training] designation is moving performance improvement to become a true profes-

sion...as the CPT gains visibility, the marketing problems will dissipate.”

Several of the performance leaders identified what they think is an emerging approach to the selling of HPI. The approach does not attempt to market or sell performance as a work methodology. Instead, as one response put it, “Just agree to do the work, use a performance methodology, and then move on.” Several in the group suggested variations on that approach: that our profession may have a tendency to seek permission to proceed, that being so process-focused we may tend to overestimate a client’s interest, or that the more strategic a consultant is the less relevant the marketing issue tends to be.

6. Who are we?

Closely related to the issue of selling HPI is the concern about defining the field. There was much agreement about the basic principles on which HPI is built, but there’s still confusion (especially among professionals who want to become performance consultants or believe they do performance work) as to what being “performance focused” actually means. Part of the concern, as noted by some of the gurus, is that the HRD field is seen by many outside it as being trendy and flitting from fad to fad. Fair or not, that means that for some HR professionals who don’t understand HPI, performance is seen as the latest “flavor of the month.”

Comments:

- “It’s ironic that as the HR profession and most organizational roles are becoming increasingly specialized, being a performance consultant calls for being a very good generalist.”
- “Historically, we’ve been more enthralled about delivering technologies than in what gets delivered.”
- “This isn’t about how we explain to a client what it is we do. This is about whether we’re part of HR or not, whether we belong to business units or headquarters, who we as performance consultants report to, and what field we think performance is part of.”
- “The nature of the work defies definition. And that is why clients have such a hard time getting their arms around who we are and what we do.”
- “How HPI is positioned not only with HR, but also in terms of OD and the whole Six Sigma movement is critical to the story we tell to clients about who we are and how credible we’ll be with that story.”

An underlying element to Who are we? has to do with the degree to which intervention specialties or

other fields overlap with HPI. As one guru noted, “It’s one thing to try to partner with OD practitioners or instructional designers, but at some point we have to decide if that’s part of the performance field or not.”

7. Am I certifiable?

The development of the ASTD/ISPI Certification generated a lot of opinions from the performance leaders. Certification was perceived by some as a tool that would shape the future of HPI by adding visibility and credibility as a defined profession. Most were favorable towards the initiative, and many have acquired the CPT designation.

Here are some comments:

- “This increases the visibility of the field and the credibility of the profession.”
- “We can expect to see the popularity of the CPT designation grow.”
- “There’s an interest from clients in certification, and this is a response to the market.”
- “Certification is increasingly popular within the HR profession, and the CPT certification is part of that population.”
- “Like it or not, credentialing is a major trend and one that is sorely needed within the consulting arena.”

A few in the group thought certification has limited value. One said, “This is an attempt to get around two larger issues: building personal credibility with clients and having data to move those clients from preconceived and wrong-headed notions. Being certified helps me do neither of those two things.”

There was, however, complete consensus that the certification approach and standards were good. Some people said that while certification is a good effort, certification for the sake of certification has no value.

8. Tool time!

All of the veteran performance consultants have developed or acquired a range of tools and approaches that they find useful in their HPI work. Many predict that a growth area for performance in the coming years will revolve around performance consulting tools. They believe there will be stronger efforts to provide comprehensive tool sets for various pieces of the HPI process and that some existing tools will be automated, thus speeding up some forms of data collection and work in large systems.

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sive tool set, especially one that is accessible to new entrants to the field.”

- “...clarity of goals and feedback on performance”
- “...quicker and more practical evaluation methodologies”
- “What every veteran performance consultant has is a real clear idea of what needs to happen in the contracting phase of the project. What’s out there for beginners is so piecemeal; someone is going to put it all together at some point.”
- “I think we’ve shied away from providing a lot of the tools we use to the larger public, in part because we fear that people will just take the tools and not use the processes and principles that are crucial to a performance focus. But as performance becomes more visible and the tools become more integrated into families or tool sets, I think we’ll see a more systematic approach to the refinement of the tools used within the profession.”

Overall, the performance leaders agree that performance tools will likely see more refinement, will become more accessible and comprehensive tool sets for performance consulting work, and will become more an area of focus.

Performance as a field is certainly growing in visibility and support. Executives and managers are pushing for more accountability and HR work that generates results. This is definitely a time of opportunity and will continue to be for those in the performance field. But it’s dangerous to assume that the future will be just more of the same only bigger and

better, or less and worse. It’s dangerous to look at the growth of performance and see it as just an expansion of what currently exists. For performance consultants and those planning to make that transition, HPI is likely to involve some significant changes from where the practice of performance is now and where it will be in 10 years. **TD**

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