The Job/Performer Level of Performance

What is the city but the people?

—William Shakespeare

We could replace Shakespeare's city with the word organization. Perhaps as a result of its efforts at Levels I and II, Computec, (the company we used as an example in our previous articles), may now have clear Organization and Process Goals. Its organization structure and its process flows may be logical, and its organization and process subgoals, resources, and interfaces may be effectively managed. However, that's not enough. By addressing the needs at the Organization and Process Levels, Computec has established a firm performance foundation. It now needs to construct a building on that foundation. That building is the performance of its people.

In our books, we have focused on systems, not because effective systems compensate for ineffective people but because ineffective systems hinder potentially effective people. Our experience has led us to a bias: most people want to do a good job. *However, if you pit a good performer against a bad system, the system will win almost every time.*

What Is the Job/Performer Level? The Job/Performer Level is so named because it looks at jobs at all levels and at the people (performers) who serve in those jobs. At this Performance Level, we take the same systems view that we take at the Organization and Process Levels. We believe that performance can be improved only if jobs and performers are analyzed in an overall performance context. The need for a systems perspective is best illustrated by an examination of managers' typical responses to people problems. Aside from the all-too-frequent response of ignoring the problem, the actions we see most often are:

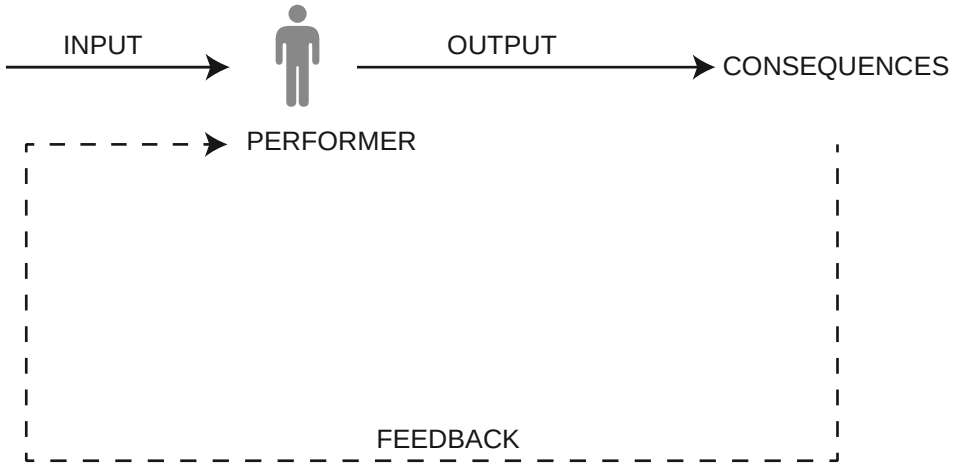
- Transfer them
- Train them
- Coach and counsel them
- Threaten them
- Discipline them
- Replace them

The common theme through all of these responses is them. Each action assumes that "them" is what's broken, and therefore "them" is what needs to be fixed.

Assuming that defective people are at the root of all performance problems is as illogical as assuming that a bad battery is at the root of all automobile malfunctions. While the battery may be at fault, a good mechanic realizes that it is part of an engine system. A number of components of that system may harbor the cause of the problem. Even if the battery is performing inadequately, it may be because of another component; the root cause may lie elsewhere in the engine. Similarly, we believe that people are one part of a "performance engine"—the Human Performance System—which has a number of components that influence performance.

The goals, design, and management at the Organization and Process Levels are part of the system that affects human performance. The Human Performance System builds on those levels by providing a more "micro" picture of people and of the immediate environment that surrounds them. The Human Performance System is displayed in Figure 1. As the figure shows, our view of the Job/Performer Level reflects the input-process-output-feedback perspective that also underpins the Organization and Process Levels.

Figure 1. The Human Performance System



Inputs are those raw materials, forms, assignments, and customer requests that cause people to perform. The input package also includes the performers' resources and the systems and procedures that represent the performers' link to the Process Level. For salespeople, the inputs may include leads, territory assignments, and market research information. Their resource inputs may include brochures, presentation aids, and product specifications. Lastly, the salespeople are expected to follow the steps in the sales process.

Performers are the individuals or groups who convert inputs to outputs. Salespeople, sales managers, market researchers, and customers are all performers.

Outputs are the products produced by the performers as their contribution to Organization and Process Goals. People's traits, skills, knowledge, and behaviors are all important performance variables. However, they are all means to the end that justifies the performers' existence in the organization—the outputs. The key output of salespeople is the sales volume they produce.

Consequences are the positive and negative effects that performers experience when they produce an output. Positive consequences may include bonuses, recognition, and more challenging work. Negative consequences include complaints, disciplinary action, and less interesting work. A consequence is determined to be positive or negative according to the unique perspective of each performer. The salespeople who bring in a lot of business may receive healthy commissions and public recognition, which they probably perceive to be positive consequences.

Salespeople who fail to meet their quotas may receive the negative consequences of lower income, reassignment to undesirable back-office jobs, or seeing their names near the bottom of a sales performance chart.

Feedback is information that tells performers what and how well they are doing. Feedback can come from error reports, statistical compilations, rejects, oral or written comments, surveys, and performance appraisals. Salespeople get feedback from customers (who buy or don't buy), from sales managers (who may compile sales performance information), and from the people who produce or deliver the product or service (who may comment on the quality of the sale).

The quality of outputs is a function of the quality of inputs, performers, consequences, and feedback. At the Job/Performer Level, we systematically analyze and improve each of the five Human Performance System components. We believe that comprehensive performance improvement results only from addressing each of the components.

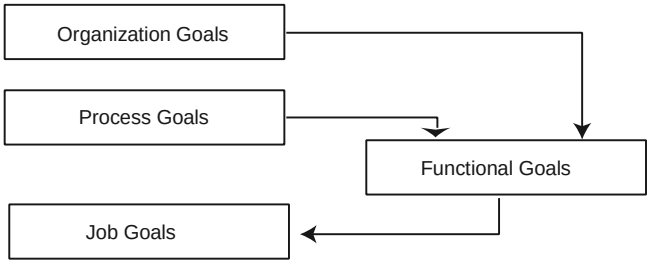
Taking Action at the Job/Performer Level

In previous articles, we discussed the consequences of taking action at the Job/Performer Level without addressing the Performance Variables at the Organization and Process Levels. The risk of failing to address the Job/Performer Level is just as serious: organization and process improvements will not take root if they are not built into jobs. If jobs are not designed to support process steps, and job environments are not structured to enable people to make their maximum contributions to process effectiveness and efficiency, then Organization and Process Goals will not be met.

For example, managers in an electronics manufacturing company identified order to delivery cycle time as a major competitive disadvantage (Organization Level). To address this disadvantage, they designed a far superior forecasting system for sales and production (Process Level). So far, so good. However, in their enthusiasm for the new process and its potential benefits, they announced and launched it as soon as the ink was dry. They did not identify the changes that were needed in the jobs affected by the new process, nor did they identify the resources and management practices required to support the new process. As a result, the launch of the new system was lengthy, painful, and more costly than necessary These managers failed to realize that the Job/ Performer Level does not automatically fall in line with changes at the Organization and Process Levels. The only way to ensure that people make their maximum possible contributions to Organization and Process Goals is to address each of the Three Job/Performer Level Performance Variables—Job Goals, Job Design, and Job Management.

Job Goals. Since the role of people is to make processes work, we need to make sure that their goals reflect process contributions. Figure 2 shows the links between Job Goals and goals at the other levels.

Figure 2. Hierarchy of Performance Goal Setting.



The major distinction between this goal "flow-down" and traditional approaches is the process (rather than functional) orientation. While Job Goals should be directly linked to functional goals, both should be derived from the processes they support. To continue our software company example, Computec identified order filling as a strategically significant cross-functional process. A critical step in that process involves checking the credit of a new customer. A Process Goal (shared by the finance department) is to accurately perform a credit check within twenty-four hours of receipt of the order. That goal translates into a set of goals for finance clerks:

- 100 percent of credit checks should be conducted within twenty-four hours of order receipt.
- 100 percent of bad credit reports should be returned to a sales representative for resolution.
- No more than 1 percent of approved customers turn out to have insufficient credit.

These goals communicate to performers what they are expected to do and how well they are expected to do it. These two ingredients specify the output component of the Human Performance System. For many performers, the "how well" (performance standard) dimension is missing. Without standards, performers cannot fully understand the level of performance they are expected to attain. We have found that the best way to build understanding of and commitment to Job Goals is to involve people in the process of establishing the goals for their jobs.

The purpose of Job Goal setting is to arrive at an affirmative answer to this question: Are job outputs and standards linked to process requirements, which are in turn linked to customer and organization requirements?

Job Design. Having established the Job Goals, we need to ensure that each job is structured to enable its incumbents to achieve these goals. Job Design is a function of:

- Allocation of responsibilities among jobs
- Sequence of job activities

- Job policies and procedures
- Ergonomics

When we establish Job Goals based on process requirements, we frequently find that jobs are cluttered with responsibilities that hamper incumbents' ability to support processes. For example, we studied the buyer position in an oil company. We found that the buyers' contribution to the purchasing process was diminished by administrative tasks, which took up a significant amount of their time. These responsibilities were transferred to a newly created position, assistant buyer. This reallocation of responsibilities freed the buyers to do what they do best—buy. In addition to establishing a new career path, the creation of this job enabled the process to function more efficiently, without compromising quality.

To help describe Job Goals and to ensure that responsibilities are allocated to appropriate jobs, we recommend constructing a Role/Responsibility Matrix. An example (using Computec) appears in Table 1.

Table 1. Role/Responsibility Matrix for Finance Function and Customer Order Process.

MAJOR PROCESS STEP	FINANCE FUNCTION ACCOMPLISHMENTS	FINANCE JOBS, RESPONSIBILITIES, AND GOALS					
		CLERK A		CLERK B		CREDIT SUPERVISOR	
		Accomplishments	Goals	Accomplishments	Goals	Accomplishments	Goals
2.Order entered	Order received	Order checked for completeness	Ø undetected errors 90% of omissions returned to sales within 8 hours of receipt				
	Customer status determined	Customer status checked in file	Ø errors in customer status info				
	Credit checked (new customer)			Customer credit checked	0.1% "OKs" have bad credit 100% checked within 24 hours of receipt		
				If OK, order updated	100% of orders updated within 24 hours of receipt		
				If not OK, sales representative informed	100% of "not OKs" returned to sales for resolution		
6.Order shipped andinvoiced	Order invoiced						

The second dimension of Job Design is the sequence of job activities—the process—that performers go through to produce their outputs. For example, if buyers are expected to justify the expenditure of a certain amount of money before they can talk to potential vendors and obtain competitive bids, they may not be able to make their maximum contribution to the purchasing process. Because they are closely linked to the sequence of job activities, job

policies and procedures can significantly help or hinder process effectiveness. For example, if the sole-source policy and the capital expenditure request form are convoluted, buyers' performance will not reach its potential.

Lastly, the job's ergonomics must support optimum performance. The design of the work station and the physical environment should present few if any barriers to meeting Job Goals. The buyers, for example, spend quite a bit of time working with their computers. Chair and table height, screen angle, and lighting should be designed for ease of computer use.

To continue our Computec example, we want to make sure that it makes sense for finance clerks to do credit checks, that they have a logical process for credit checking, that they have a set of policies and guidelines for credit checking, and that their work stations are conducive to optimum credit checking performance.

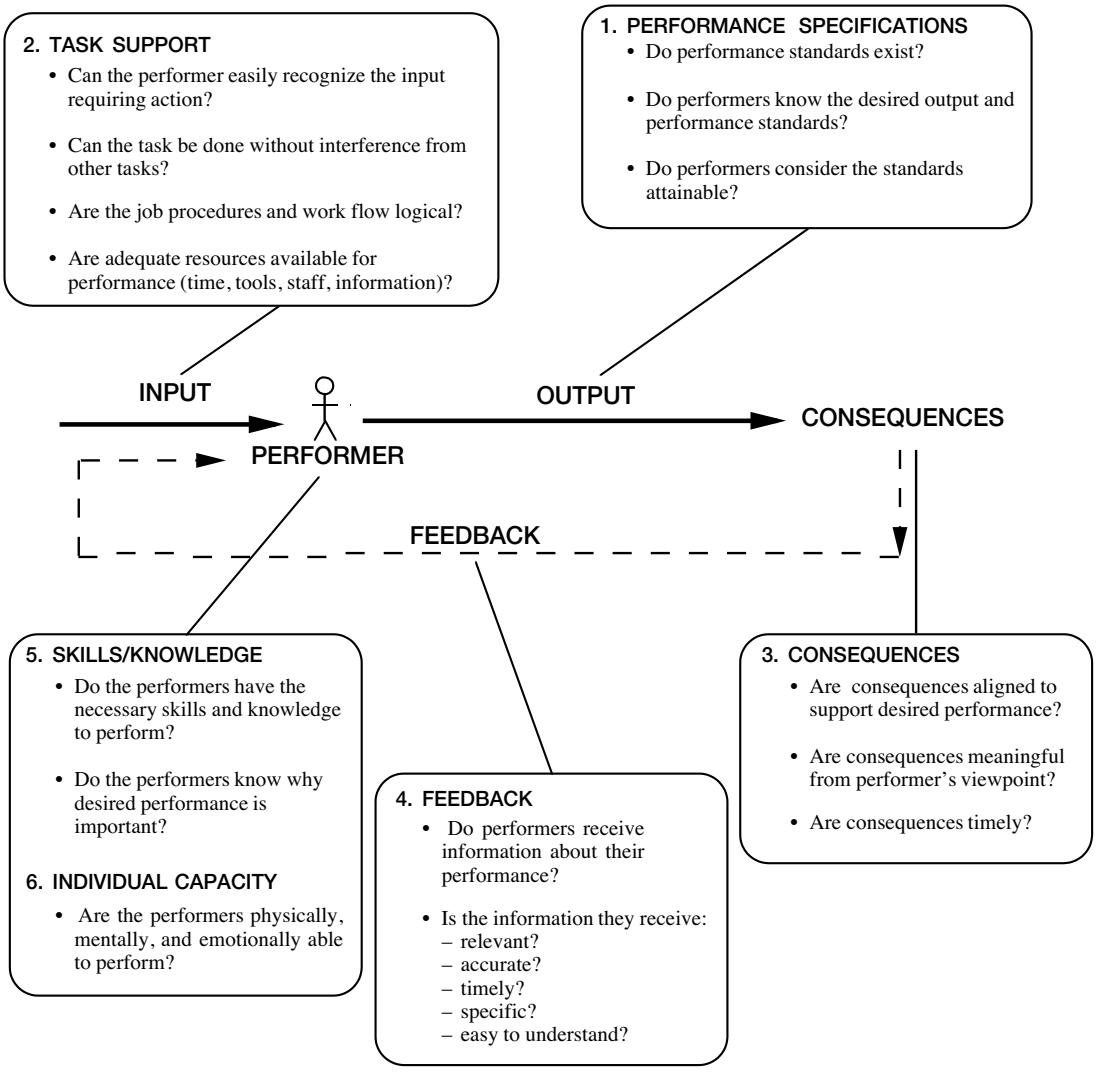
These are the questions for the variable of Job Design:

- Are process requirements reflected in the appropriate jobs?
- Are job steps in a logical sequence?
- Have supportive policies and procedures been developed?
- Is the job environment ergonomically sound?

Job Management. Managing the Job/Performer Level is managing the five components of the Human Performance System depicted in Figure 1. We have found that six factors affect the effectiveness and efficiency of the Human Performance System. These factors are depicted in Figure 3 (on next page).

The purpose of Job Management is to put capable people in an environment that supports their accomplishment of Job Goals. Factors 5 and 6 in Figure 3 address the capability of the performers. Factors 1 through 4 list the factors in a supportive environment.

Figure 6.3 Factors Affecting the Human Performance System.



1. *Performance Specifications* are the outputs and standards that comprise the Job Goals. A manager who participatively establishes process-driven Job Goals is taking steps to ensure that the questions behind this factor are answered affirmatively. By contrast, the answers are no for salespeople who are not clear on the mix of products they are expected to sell. They have a Performance Specification deficiency.
2. *Task Support* is partially addressed by Job Design. A well-structured job (in a well-structured process) contains easily recognized high-quality inputs, minimal interference, and logical procedures. Managers who want to minimize Task Interference take one additional step. They provide their people with adequate resources to do the job. For example, the volume of paperwork may take a significant amount of salespeople's time away from their primary responsibility—selling. If so, their selling performance is impeded by Task Interference.
3. *Consequences* must support efficient achievement of Job Goals. Because of a strategic (Organization Level) thrust, one of a salesperson's Job Goals may be to sell a certain volume of new products. If the commission system supports selling the old products, the salesperson's consequences are not aligned to support desired performance. The consequences must also be meaningful to the performer. A given salesperson may not perceive a promotion to sales manager as a positive consequence. Lastly, consequences must occur quickly enough to provide an ongoing incentive. A salesperson who does want to be a sales manager is unlikely to find that consequence sufficiently motivating if he or she cannot reasonably expect it to be delivered in the next five years. The promotion is aligned to support desired performance, but does not come quickly enough to serve as the sole incentive.
4. *Feedback* tells a performer to change performance or to keep on performing the same way. Without feedback, good performance can fall off track, and poor performance can remain unimproved. Effective feedback meets the criteria listed in Figure 3. If feedback is delivered only to the sales force as a whole, individual salespeople may not perceive it as relevant or be able to use it to guide their performance. If feedback is provided only during an annual performance review, it is probably not timely enough to be effective. If feedback is not specific ("Good job" or "Please strengthen that forecast next time"), it will fail to make its contribution to the effectiveness of the Human Performance System.
5. *Skills and Knowledg*e are required in any job. If they are missing, job performance is impaired, and training may be required. Included in this category is not only the official way of doing the job but also hints and shortcuts ("tribal knowledge") that enable some

performers to be exemplary. Salespeople need to know their product/service lines and be skilled in the techniques of selling.

6. *Individual Capacity* involves performers' internal capabilities. No matter how supportive their environment (Factors 1–4) or effective their training (Factor 5), they will not be able to do their jobs if they lack the physical, mental, or emotional capacity to achieve the goals. A salesperson who cannot take rejection may have an Individual Capacity deficiency.

People occasionally tell us that we've missed a factor. They indicate that the key performance variable is motivation (or desire, or drive, or attitude, or morale). We agree that motivation is key; however, it's a symptom. When we look behind weak (or strong) motivation, we find our six factors. *If capable (Factor 6), well-trained (Factor 5) people are placed in a setting with clear expectations (Factor 1), task support (Factor 2), reinforcing consequences (Factor 3), and appropriate feedback (Factor 4), then they will be motivated.*

As the examples illustrate, one powerful use of the questions in Figure 3 is as a troubleshooting checklist. Each no answer represents some "dirt in the performance engine" and an opportunity for performance improvement. In our experience, the highest percentage of performance opportunities can be found in the environment (Factors 1–4) in which performers work. While the figure varies somewhat in different jobs, industries, and countries, *we have found that about 80 percent of performance improvement opportunities reside in the environment.* Usually, 15 to 20 percent of the opportunities are in the Skills and Knowledge area. We have found that fewer than 1 percent of performance problems result from Individual Capacity deficiencies.

Our experience is consistent with that of Edward Deming, who maintains that only 15 percent of performance problems are worker problems and 85 percent are management problems. Since the odds are against the performer being the broken component of the Human Performance System, the typical management responses to performance problems (listed at the beginning of this article) are not likely to address the need.

We have presented the Human Performance System and its related questions as a diagnostic tool. The bad news is that diagnosing a situation does not in itself bring about performance improvement. The good news is that each diagnosed deficiency within the six factors (each no answer) suggests an action.

To address the need for clear *Performance Specifications*, we recommend creating a *Job Model*, which specifies the outputs and standards that are linked to process requirements.

To ensure *Task Support*, restructure the job so that it has clear inputs, a logical sequence of activities, minimal interference among tasks, and sufficient resources. While Job Design can be difficult, most large organizations have specialists in this area. If these skills are not

available, a work team of incumbents, supervisors, and analysts can usually, without any sophisticated technology, make the changes necessary to remove the most significant Task Support barriers.

Consequence deficiencies can be eliminated by adding positive consequences and removing negative consequences for desired responses. While this may sound like it requires one or two degrees in psychology, it doesn't. Performers are very willing to tell anyone who will listen what they find punishing and what incentives work for them. Again, an organization that does not have resident expertise in this area can draw on the collective wisdom of a team of incumbents and supervisors and, perhaps, an analyst. Designing an effective *Feedback* system tends to require a bit more specialized background. However, an informal system may be all that is needed. The objective is to develop an efficient means of regularly and frequently providing specific performance information to people. The sole feedback mechanism in many organizations is the annual performance appraisal process. However, most appraisal systems are weak in two key feedback areas: frequency and specificity. A manager or analyst who is not able to change the formal performance appraisal form or process must develop other ways to get people the feedback they need when they need it.

To overcome deficiencies in *Skills and Knowledge,* provide classroom training, on-the-job training, and/or a job aid. While training and job-aid design require a body of expertise, those skills usually reside within an organization's human resource development department.

The action to address an *Individual Capacity* deficiency depends on the nature of the deficiency. One of three responses is appropriate: change the job to fit the person (for example, redesign the work station to accommodate a wheelchair), develop the person to fit the job (for example, arrange for counseling in coping with stress), or remove the person from the job (for example, transfer him or her to a job that doesn't require mathematics).

There are lots of great medications out there. Training, for example, is an effective cure. However, it treats only the disease known as a Skills and Knowledge deficiency. It probably won't ease the pain of the other five afflictions. Another popular treatment is reorganization. An effective reorganization can remove some barriers to Task Support, but will do little to address other needs. *The net message is that one should diagnose the need before implementing a solution*.

Diagnosing and overcoming deficiencies represents only one of three uses of the Human Performance System. The six factors can also be used to improve performance that is already meeting expectations. Any improvement in Feedback or Consequences, for example, will make good performance even better. *Managers and analysts can also use the questions as a checklist, which can help them create a supportive environment around a new or changed job.* For example, they can design clear Performance Specifications and structure reinforcing Consequences before the job is created and filled.

There's yet another benefit. While each enhancement of the Human Performance System improves the quality and efficiency of performance, it also enriches the quality of work life. As a result, performers are willing partners in all three applications of the tool.

At Computec, finance clerks need:

- To understand their three credit-checking goals
- To have manuals, phones, credit-history information, calculators, and other resources required to check credit
- To be rewarded for reaching or exceeding their Job Goals
- To receive frequent, specific feedback on their credit-checking performance
- To know the what, why, and how of effective an deficient credit checking
- To be mentally and emotionally able to conduct credit checks in the environment of the finance department

At a high level, these are the questions for Job Management:

- Do the performers understand the Job Goals (the outputs they are expected to produce and the standards they are expected to meet)?
- Do the performers have sufficient resources, clear signals and priorities, and a logical Job Design?
- Are the performers rewarded for achieving the Job Goals?
- Do the performers know if they are meeting the Job Goals?
- Do the performers have the necessary skills and knowledge to achieve the Job Goals?
- If the performers were in an environment in which the five questions listed above were answered yes, would they have the physical, mental, and emotional capacity to achieve the Job Goals?

Summary

Organization and Process Goals can be achieved only through performance at the Job/Performer Level. Managing people is not easy, but it's less mystical than it may seem. Rather than hiring good people and hoping for efficient, high-quality performance, effective managers use the Human Performance System to manage the factors that enable those good people to perform at an exemplary level. Managers recognize that everyone is in a Human Performance System and they recognize the six factors that influence the effectiveness of that system. Furthermore, they realize that the four environmental factors (which are largely within their control) tend to harbor the greatest opportunities for performance improvement. We have found that:

- Executives can use the Job/Performer Level's outlook and tools to clarify the responsibilities and measure the performance of their direct reports; to ensure that the

Human Performance System will and can support the policies that they are considering issuing; to create Human Performance Systems that maximize the quality of outputs, productivity, and work life of their direct reports; to diagnose and improve their own Human Performance Systems; and, to ensure that organization-wide changes are supported by the environments in which they will be carried out.

- Managers can use the Job/Performer Level's outlook in the same ways as executives for their direct reports, themselves, and the changes they manage.
- Analysts (especially human resource specialists, industrial engineers, and systems analysts) can use the Job/Performer Level's outlook and tools to diagnose and address performance needs; to ensure that the changes they recommend or are asked to make are supported by the Human Performance System; to manage their bosses and others with whom they have to work; and to diagnose and improve their own performance and enhance the quality of their own work life.