

## ARTICLE REPRINT: **TRANSFERRING KNOW-HOW USING A METHODOLOGY**

### **Abstract**

Capturing and deploying a methodology requires the same type of work as creating a performance-based training program. You need to clearly define the work and then design and build an integrated set of information, tools, references, and training. In fact, you should consider qualifying performers on key tasks to ensure performance is consistent and reinforces the brand/identity of the methodology.

This article summarizes the challenges and considerations for support efforts related to getting a methodology “reduced to practice.”

### **Thanks for your interest!**

The following pages contain an extended version of an article that was previously published in “Building Capability,” the PRH Consulting quarterly newsletter.

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## How to Leverage Your Know-How in a Methodology

By Peter R. Hybert

### *There's a Method to the Madness*

Sooner or later, any business that is engaged in an endeavor that involves doing something that is new (i.e., something they have invented) or in trying to build/ grow a business, will begin to think about how to deliver consistently and how to pass on this know-how to new practitioners. A logical solution is to document their business practices in a methodology and then train people on how to apply it.

This isn't a new idea—this is exactly what franchises do. But it isn't as easy as it sounds on the surface. We have had the opportunity to work with a number of clients in methodology projects. (We even once started a company to market an instructional design methodology.) Quite often, there is really less agreement and explicit know-how about the methodology than everyone assumed at first. Usually, it is more work than everyone expects to actually document the methodology. Finally, it is more work than everyone expected to actually train people to perform consistently. It can be one of those things of which can be said “it seemed like a good idea at the time.”

Actually, none of this is to suggest that trying to capture and disseminate a methodology is a bad idea. What is interesting is that the problems mentioned above are common to almost *every* training design/ development project! It is always difficult to define a common way for work to be done! It is always difficult to build supporting tools and information! It is always difficult to really train people to perform! (It is easy to create a powerpoint deck...but to really train someone requires you to give them opportunities to practice and receive feedback...that is more difficult and it takes more time!) The difference with a methodology is the scale of the endeavor.

### *What is a Methodology?*

First things first—let's start with a definition. To us, a methodology is a prescribed way of doing work along with the supporting tools and information. Documenting the methodology means capturing the know-how and packaging it into process, tools, information, and training. To have a methodology, we recommend you have at least the elements shown in the following table.

<b>Deliverable</b>	<b>Description/ Comments</b>
Process	The steps, roles, outputs of the methodology
Tools	May be hardware or software tools—things that do some of the work for the performer
Reference Information	On-line or paper documents—on-line tools may actually straddle the fence between a reference and a tool
Training	Support processes and materials for transferring and verifying capability to execute the methodology
Other Resources	Usually this category consists of experts who are available to provide assistance
Branding	Identifying images, slogans, etc. to help others recognize the methodology

### ***Process First***

Before you can think about transferring capability, you first need to define the work process. Typically, tools and references are created here as well. This is usually where you discover that the methodology is not as consistent and commonly understood as initially believed. People in a growing business where they are inventing solutions to address specific problems often apply and adapt the general concepts and tools of the process somewhat freely. This gets the job done but results in many different ideas about what the methodology really is, the right way to do it, and when it should be used. People become concerned that standardizing the methodology means they will lose the freedom to skip steps (or add new ones).

In one project, we worked with a team of practitioners to actually define the methodology itself based on the work they had been doing individually. The process would discover what was common and what was unique. This approach builds a team of people that are more likely cooperate (or even compromise) on how things should be done and to collaborate on decisions in the future. The downside is that you have to build time into the project to engage more people in the process. But with a large organization, this is really the best way to go.

In a project to address a new product introduction methodology, we were responsible for the training while the client defined the process. They elected to appoint a small team (of staff “experts”) and dictate what the new process would be for four business units with very different business models. You might expect that there would have been some resistance when it was rolled out but there really wasn’t—the target audience just ignored it.

Related to the challenge of defining the process is deciding how much detail to capture/enforce. It is one thing to agree on a high-level process model. It is much more difficult to agree on what the deliverables will look like, which steps must be performed in which order, where approvals should happen, etc.

When we were working with a call center to define their call flow process, we discovered that the natural tendency of people seemed to be “more control is always better.” So where at first a general process flow was a huge improvement, (not much) later they wanted to add “key things to cover” at each point in the call process. Then they evolved to wanting to actually script the words! As you can imagine, the difficulty of getting a tool that is useable, will fit a variety of situations, and will be accepted becomes exponentially greater as specificity increases. It makes the enforcement problem much more difficult as well.

One of the biggest watch-fors in building a new methodology is creating something that scares off the users—a huge number of steps or detailed procedures is intimidating to say the least. The worst case scenario is that the learners miss the gist of the methodology—they don't see the forest for the trees. The way to address this is to be careful how much control and detail you build in and also to build simple views of the big picture. These models can be reinforced as the framework and incorporated into the branding as well.

For internal methodologies, you may also need to create and/or change policies to reinforce doing the work as defined.

## ***Tools***

Tools are anything that either helps you do more work or do work you wouldn't be able to do if left to your own devices. A jack helps you lift a car you ordinarily couldn't. Google™ search engine helps you find information faster than you could by browsing. A spreadsheet in which you plug some assumptions and then get out an estimate allows you to try out alternatives more rapidly than normal. All these things are tools.

Probably the most common tools in a methodology are forms for capturing information and decisions. Checklists of steps are also common. Because a methodology is, at heart, a procedure, things to do are of the essence. Unfortunately, too often the tools are created in a way that makes it easy for the author, rather than for the user.

Ultimately, the key with tools is finding opportunities where tools will make the methodology easier to use or more fool-proof. Creating tools is similar to a process improvement or simplification effort—it requires a knowledge of the process (so you know where the “pinch points” are) and enough knowledge of the relevant technology to know a tool can be built effectively.

For example, we have seen Excel spreadsheets that started as someone's rapid solution to a specific project need but then, over time, evolved to become very complex, multi-spreadsheet workbooks. They were impressive but, for the intended purpose, a database would have been a better answer—the players involved just didn't know how to create a database. Anyone new trying to learn the highly evolved Excel™ tool would have a very steep learning curve.

Final suggestion—think about how you can organize the tools into a toolkit. Especially for computer-based tools, users have to be able to find them when they are doing the work. It won't help if it is on a shared drive somewhere unless they do their work while on the network. And, if they can't find the right folder, eventually they will give up looking. One client had a lot of discussion trying to decide where to store a checklist—would it be better in a folder called “tools” or in the folder where other files relating to that particular process step were kept. Ultimately, we decided to use links and “pointers” so it could be stored in one place but would be “findable” from many—in a digital environment, robust usually means being set up for a variety of users and applications.

## ***Reference Resources***

Technically, reference sources are tools. But in a methodology project you may make a concerted effort to build these to help new practitioners benefit from the experience of early users, usually, the creators of the methodology. For example, one client whose methodology involves finding best-in-class pricing and delivery for purchased products, stores the results of previous project research in a database. So if you are starting a new project sourcing copying/reproduction

supplies (e.g., toner, paper, etc.), you can shortcut some of your initial research by simply searching the database for information on similar products.

All methodologies will end up producing some type of procedural document (again, “document” refers to both paper and on-line documents). This normally includes a process map/steps, any rules/policies, roles, tools, etc. This type of information is focussed on describing the methodology.

In addition to the information describing the methodology, in some cases, you may elect to capture past know-how. In the case of defining a combinatorial chemistry methodology, one large source of reference data was the historical data from several years of research using the combinatorial approach—the actual “chemistries.” (For non-chemists, think of this as the things they already tried mixing together and what happened when they mixed them.) Capturing that know-how would help the next practitioner to avoid duplicating the same type of experiment but might also give them guidance if they decide to try a variation. Our team simply built a “template” for the type of information needed (e.g., chemical formula, the sequence of reactions, diagram of the resulting molecule, etc.) and then the experts filled them in for the individual chemistries they were working on. Framing the information upfront made it easier for the experts to contribute—we were able to get rapid consistent data as input and later users of the information would also know what to expect to find and how to best look for it. It might have been easier at first to just scan in a series of lab notebooks but much less useful to the end users.

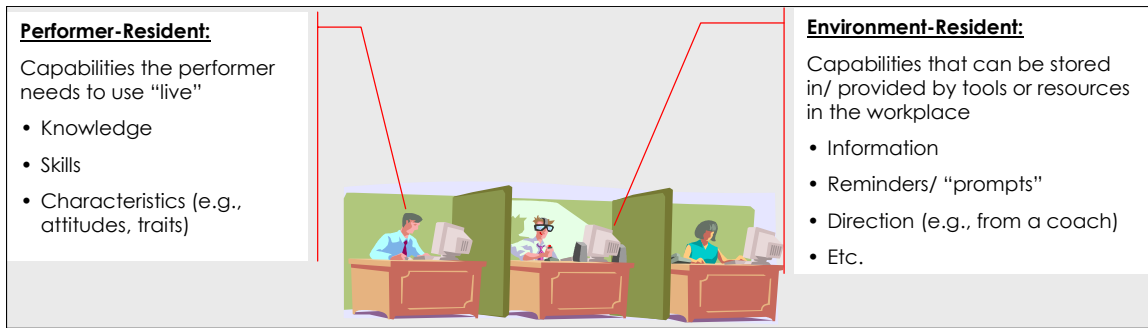
## ***Training***

No matter what the project, we always advocate training to capability. If all you intend to provide is information, just point people to the reference info. Training should include opportunities for each individual learner to try out at least the key steps of the methodology.

Of course training doesn't have to be limited to the classroom. There are a number of ways to train new practitioners, each requiring support materials and processes. For example,

- On-the-job learning/coaching guides and checklists
- Verification of capability (i.e., certification or qualification) through review of work outputs, observation of performance, and/or debrief of participants
- On-line modules for “a little before just-in-time”

Of course, it can be difficult sometimes to determine whether a deliverable is really training, reference, or tool. Digital technology has made it much easier to create multi-purpose products. Still, we think it is important to be clear about what each chunk is for so that it is efficient and effective for the end user. Below is a diagram that summarizes the way we think about what content to put into which type of deliverable.



## Branding

Branding is not the most important component but it is a key success factor. We have already described the meat of the methodology, but it certainly helps to have a recognizable identity. This is called branding because it is just like putting your brand on a piece of livestock—you are claiming ownership. You want anyone who sees it to know it is your’s.

Usually the identity consists of

- An image, such as a logo
- A slogan that summarizes the intent and/or what differentiates your methodology
- A common “look and feel” for any artifacts (from invoices to actual deliverables)

Professional organizations charge quite a bit for creating corporate identities—if they are good, they are probably worth it. In most cases, however, internal organizations can do all right if they have someone with some art skills and the discipline to “keep it simple.” And, if they have the discipline to enforce the consistent use and representation of the methodology. The real key with branding is having an actual identity underneath. The brand is intended to represent the methodology and having practitioners performing consistently (and recognizably so) is more important for establishing the brand than the logo.

## Conclusion

If you have a business activity that you think can be leveraged, you may have the basis for a methodology. Documenting a work process and then working toward consistent performance is a central focus on most quality approaches (e.g., TQM, lean, Six Sigma, etc.)—you need to get a process under control before you can improve it.

But, before you decide to codify your methodology, check that there is a real business need. Also, check that you have ownership of key intellectual property so that you can market the methodology freely. And, make sure you have the will—success will require that you and your team roll up your sleeves. It is hard work to “reduce something to practice.”

But if you do decide to leverage your know-how through your methodology, we hope this article will help you plan/scope the effort. We hope it has given you some ideas that will help you avoid common pitfalls. And we would be delighted to help—we have been there and have done that before.