



leveraging know-how for performance!

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Building Capability Programming People

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Network of Strength

Again this year on Mother's Day, PRH Consulting will be participating in the Network of Strength walk for breast cancer research.



Dear Peter

Greetings!

It's springtime in Chicago which means the weather and the Cubs are both unpredictable. (Unless you predict the unpredictability...)



In this message, we wonder about why more companies don't take seriously the need to manage human capability. After all, we devote lots of hours and dollars to tracking even the tiniest hardware component (yes, fasteners are included in ERP systems) but leave human capabilities to be managed only in the broadest strokes. We aren't suggesting a gnat's eyelash level of detail but certainly some level of identification and management of strategic capabilities should be on every manager's radar.

Of course, everybody loves multi-tasking so we can't resist weighing in on it. But this is an important factor to consider in today's business environment. People are being pressured to continuously do more with less. Employees are tethered to their emails and workflows whether they are at work or not. Lawmakers are passing laws against texting while driving (which is definitely a good idea) but what about tweeting while meeting? As much as we want to be getting things done all the time, maybe we would get more done by focusing. What do you think?

Ever visit a website that almost got you the information you need? That may actually be more frustrating than not being able to find it at all...at least, that is what our monthly rant argues.

April was also the ISPI International Conference and Expo. We had a great time and met a lot of new people. And, we posted our presentation material on the website. Picked up some good ideas and new enthusiasm for some old ones...pretty soon it will be time to start thinking about what to propose for next year...

If you are going to be in Chicago on May 9, why not join us at Grant Park at 6:30am? (No worries, there is a Starbucks right across the street!)

Or, participate in one of the other 13 cities. Or participate on the virtual walk. Learn more about the event at

www.networkofstrength.org

Look for Team Faith.

And, please contribute if you think this is a good cause.

Next Issue

Stay tuned for more on process and capability, as well as other relevant topics related to building and supporting human performance. Some topics we have on deck include

- Is your performance organization more like an army or a group of lone rangers?
- Rant: Is compliance with a standard process equivalent to mastery performance?
- And more...

And for additional content, check out the Library on our website.



Twittering, etc.

We are on Twitter (*though, we are not yet sure why*)



Chirp with us: @Prhconsulting

Related Information

Enjoy!

Pete

Peter R. Hybert, CPT

Principal Consultant

Programming People Managing Capability

If you were building robots to perform work in your factory, you would have a library of programs that would need to be loaded into each one. Some would be basic programs that perform minor functions while other programs would be more essential. Some would be unique (e.g., perform a specific weld) and others might be common (e.g., communicating status periodically to a central point).

Somewhere in your organization, there would be a person (or many) in charge of keeping track of those programs. If changes were made to the work process, you would need to change the program. If there were a change to one program, someone would need to check related programs to make sure they would all still work once the change was made. There would be a list of the programs needed for each robot role - before launching a replacement robot, the technician would need to make sure it had all the programs needed to perform.

What if we thought of people performing work in an organization as robots? What if we had a list of the capabilities they needed to have in order to perform certain roles? Not just general headings or tendencies (e.g., Project Management, Sense of Urgency, Teamwork) but specific capabilities. Such as the ability to operate specific equipment, interpret specific policies, knowledge of specific domains (e.g., customer segments, material characteristics, intellectual property law in Russia, etc.).

You are either cheering or jeering right now, aren't you? Of course people aren't robots...of course we are not advocating programming people and neither are we advocating the view that they are replaceable components in an organization.

But, we are saying that work processes require specific capabilities. And, that most organizations aren't adequately concerned or consistent about identifying those capabilities and managing them. If they were, you would be able to find

- A **list of the capabilities** needed to perform a given role
- A **plan for addressing changes** in capabilities driven by various planned changes in the business (e.g., new products, new processes, new tools, new knowledge domains)
- A **description of specific capabilities** that go to enough detail to allow someone to assess whether a person has that capability or not
- Links from capabilities to **specific support items** that help deliver them - for example, related training, reference materials, or even tools
- An **inventory of capabilities** in the company today - you would be able to find out how much of which capability is in the business (to ensure we had enough to meet the demands of the business plan)
- Mention of capabilities in business **strategy**, for example, if there were a merger, there would be a plan for analyzing the work processes of the two organizations and identifying which process (or a new hybrid process) would be used in the merged organization. Then, an analysis of the impact on the capability requirements - whether new knowledge/skills be needed and, if so, the plan for getting them in place

Check it out...we have posted our recent ISPI presentation materials in the "presentations" section of our website.

Or, just visit our online library for a range of information.

Discuss Amongst Yourself...

Are You Competent?

Researchers know something about people's ability to accurately assess their own competence...the surprise is NOT that we all grade ourselves more competent than we should...we should have seen that coming. Find out the real surprise in our post "Are You Competent?"

www.prhconsulting.com/blog.

We use the blog for short notes and commentary on business and human performance issues. Recently, we posted

- What Gets Measured, Gets Counted
- If Less is More, Nothing Must be Everything
- The Little Things

For the details, visit our blog.

Pass it On

It's easy to forward this newsletter to interested colleagues -- just click the "forward" link at the bottom!

Certainly people are not robots. For one thing, we are sort of "self-programming." People will seek after and learn things we perceive will be needed in our role. We won't sit back and wait until someone tells us we need a new skill - if there is a way to improve many workers will go after it...even if they don't really need it!

But, that can be a problem too if they are learning stuff that increases their individual value but doesn't support the organization's goals. You can't manage what you don't understand. If you can't list the capabilities, or if every sub-group in the company uses different language to describe the capabilities, you certainly can't manage that inventory.

And there could be a real opportunity in doing so. If most companies aren't doing this, then it is a potential advantage your company can gain. If your organization spent the same effort preparing for capability as for other areas of the business (e.g., product life cycle, market entry, factory expansion, etc.) it would have a competitive barrier that is difficult to overcome - anyone can buy the same technology but building real capability takes concentrated effort over time.

The work of managing capability isn't easy. But it isn't as vague and esoteric as it sounds. In the projects we've done, the biggest challenge has been managing the volume of data. Make no mistake, people are carrying around a lot of individual capabilities...just imagine if you were to try to write down everything you know how to do. Conduct sales calls. Use Microsoft Word. Swim. Use your smart phone. There are potentially millions of line items.

The key is in managing the detail, not ignoring it. Setting up categories and sub-categories so you can discuss a block of items without getting bogged down in the individual details. But, still having the details there if you need them. This prevents the vague discussions and confusion of different concepts related to the same core thing. Another key is having a structure and boundaries so you can focus on specific items without getting overwhelmed in a sea of items that really aren't relevant.

The most difficult thing is getting people to dig in and get started. Maybe it is kind of like cleaning a messy garage...once you finish, it feels great. But it takes a lot of mental will to plow into it. And, like the garage, it is easier and much more beneficial to keep it clean going forward than to let it devolve into its natural state of chaos...plan to maintain your results going forward or it is hardly worth starting.

Is managing capabilities really worthwhile? Supposedly, this is the information age. Supposedly, people are a company's most valuable assets and the most vital competitive advantage. Supposedly, things are changing at a faster rate than at any time previously in history. Logically, this is definitely worthwhile.

Is the technology available to program people? Let's hope it never arrives. But is the know-how is there to identify and define capability requirements for specific work and across an organization? Certainly...we've done projects like that. If you are interested, let's talk.

Send comments to [Pete Hybert](mailto:Pete.Hybert).

Can you connect processes to roles to capability requirements? Would it be a good way to align your HR systems?

Give us a call...we have some ideas.



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Multitasking

Please Raise Your Hands and Move Away from the Smartphone...

There has been a lot of interest in multitasking lately. People argue that it is impossible...that it is really nothing more than rapidly switching between doing two individual tasks. Others argue that it may be impossible for "older people" but that today's "wired" generation can handle it. In fact, they argue that some people perform better when multitasking. Still others claim that we are hurting our health with all the stress and ADD-behaviors.

We decided to check some research and then float some of our own pet theories.

First, The Research...

A recent study by Stanford professor Clifford Nass (for details, check out the [original article](#)) showed that multitaskers may actually become more distractable. His team started with the assumption that multitaskers have a gift or skill. He discovered it wasn't superb control over what they paid attention to -- they performed poorly in the experiment because they could NOT ignore irrelevant stimuli. They then checked to see if the multitaskers were better at storing and organizing information...that too failed to pan out. Finally they checked for better skills at switching from one task to another...but no, the multitaskers performed poorly here too. They concluded, multitasking is a bad habit, not a preference or working style...if you multitask, you should stop.

In a recent New York Times [post](#), [Matt Richtel](#) reported on similar research that found slightly different conclusions. He found a study from the [University of Utah](#) that determined about 2.5% of people actually can multitask effectively, though they caution that the odds of either you or me actually being part of that group are low and recommended strongly against multitasking, especially when driving.



But, there was an article [Time magazine](#) published online that cited a study that found you could improve your ability to multitask by playing

video games more than 5 hours a day. If that is what it takes, I will never find out. But, that might explain the perceived generational difference. However, this study, conducted by Daphne Bavelier, a professor at the University of Rochester, was targeted at "supertaskers" and it too cautioned that we, as individuals, should assume we are, in fact, part of the 97.5% of the population who are *not capable* of multitasking effectively.

Finally, there was a [study](#) that seems to show we can actually pay attention to two things at once...just not three. There is a portion of the brain called the medial prefrontal cortex that gets involved when the person is sufficiently motivated (i.e., when there is enough perceived reward in doing two tasks). This part of the brain has two hemispheres and, for two tasks, it seems to split the work by hemisphere (based on brain imaging). But the third task gets in the way...maybe because there is no easy way to create three segments of your brain.

Now, the Pet Theories...

Richard Feynman was one of the physicists who worked on developing the atomic bomb. He was a brilliant mathematician but also an original thinker. As a physicist, he was often invented simple experiments to figure things out. For fun, he apparently got interested in multitasking more than 40 years ago. (He also invented the concept of nano-technology in a speech in 1959!)

Feynman tried different types of tasks, such as counting socks while reading the newspaper or trying to guess when a minute was over while climbing stairs. One thing he found was that people counted time differently. Some visualized a clock while others counted seconds by talking to themselves. Feynman could read the paper and count the time because he was counting out loud in his head...using his "audio" brain processes for counting, leaving his visual processes free for reading. One of his colleagues was able to talk and count time because he was visualizing the numbers.

Our take on Feynman's conclusions, as well as the research above, is that the multitasking you are able to do is a function of how the brain works. Richard Restak reports that when you imagine doing a physical task, the brain circuits that are activated are the same as when you actually do it...except for the specific circuits that move the body. Imagining you are throwing a ball activates the same parts of your brain as actually throwing it, except for the parts that move your arm.

Feynman's multitasking, and the researchers' as well, varied depending less on the individual and more on the type of task. If you are using different parts of the brain, you can more easily multitask but if you need to use the same areas, it becomes impossible. That's why you can talk on the phone and fold laundry at the same time pretty easily. But you can't read and talk on the phone at the same time very well -- both tasks are fighting over the "verbal" part of your brain.

The other key factor is conscious attention. In this, our experience seems to agree with the researchers that people can really only focus on one thing at a time. So, if you are folding laundry and talking on the phone, you probably aren't thinking about the laundry too much. If something were to happen though, for example, you discover a sock is missing, you might lose a little of the conversational thread.

The importance of understanding these issues is that we have to consider the impact of multitasking employees when we design processes, run meetings (especially on-line meetings), build tools, and any number of work-related design and management activities. We may have to build in guards against multitasking or we may have to design things that are robust *against* multitasking (that is, they work acceptably even if people *are* multitasking).

Do you have any experiences or insights related to multitasking and performance? Please let us know.

Rant: Websites That Promise More Than

They Deliver

Enter Your Password to Reset Your Password

We all love the internet. It has put information at our fingertips that we would have spent hours looking for even ten years ago. Remember having to carry a pile of maps in your car? Or having to memorize your friends' phone numbers?

Of course the downside is that we want more. Instead of being happy to have anything, we whine about something when it just isn't the way we want it. For example.

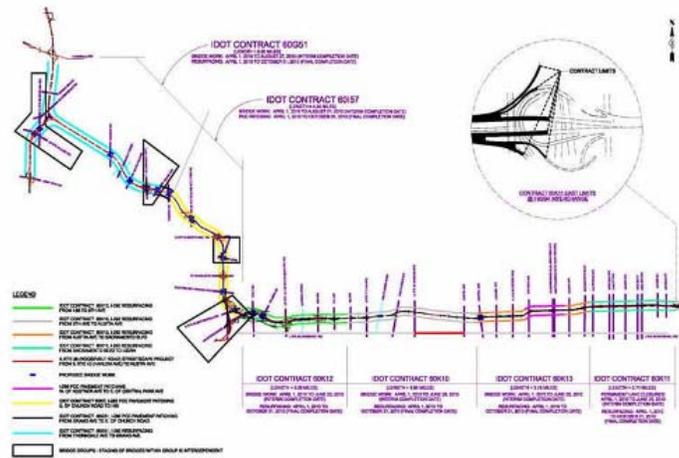
I have been know to fix my own appliances on occasion. Not too often -- I'm not that good at it. But once in awhile I will have a problem with something that is too minor to bother taking the thing in for repair and definitely too minor to justify buying a new one, but a big enough problem to require action. Recently, it was a wheel on our vacuum cleaner. The vacuum was out of warranty but still pretty new. Without the wheel though, it was just a noisy air blower.

As it happens it was a Sears vacuum and Sears has a GREAT parts website. If you have the model number and you know what the part you are looking for is probably called (i.e., "wheel") you can find it, click a few times, and the wheel shows up in the mail in a couple of days. It feels great to now have that wheel on the vacuum...now I know that the accusing sneer it gives me as it sulks in the closet is from my ignoring it, not lack of maintenance.

Having done this process a few times with Sears products (including a refrigerator) my expectations were high and when I needed a part for our snowblower, I once again went to the web. This time, though, I was thwarted by a common website problem. The company had, in fact, put their information on the web but didn't try out the full task process from the standpoint of the average user. Incidentally, right after this, I had a problem caused by the exact same root cause on the Illinois Department of Transportation site.

In both cases, the problem manifested itself to me (the user) as an obstacle preventing me from completing the process. (When we test training, we call these stumbling blocks or tripping points...whenever a user is pulled up short, as a designer, you need to figure out what they aren't getting and make it more intuitive. Even if "it's written right there!" you need to do something because obviously, they didn't see it.)

First I got the model number (which, wasn't visible on the actual snowblower but I was able to find it on the paperwork which I had managed not to lose). I went to the manufacturer's website and found some great drawings -- in no time at all I found the part. I clicked on the part number but it wouldn't do anything. Hmmm. I tried to copy the number...it was an image. Had to go write down the number. Annoying. Then go to another page where the information was organized differently and had to do some additional searching to get the part ordered.



Similarly, when I was looking at our local Department of Transportation website, they had a map showing construction areas. You simply select the contract number on the map and you can see where the work is being done. Which would have been great if I was a person with a contract to do construction! But then, why would I need to look on the web?!? Presumably, I would already know where I am working before I signed the contract! Another way to find projects is by county, by congressional district, or by IDOT district. (But, why not just draw the areas on the map? Most people only know the county or congressional district they live in but, if there is construction near your home, you probably already know about it!!)

The Cold Start Test

These are both examples of the same mistake -- the goal of the website development seems to have been "post our information on the web." Instead, it should have been "help a user find and order the right part" or "help a driver find and avoid construction delays." In both cases, the user has something they are trying to do. They aren't looking for information just to acquire it...they are trying to do a task. I guess the solution is really "performance-based web design." Performance-based product design would be good too.

At a previous job, we had a product that would "cold start," that is, turn itself off and then back on, and when it did, it didn't work. Cold starting deleted the memory so that anything it was programmed to do would no longer happen. It was a defect of the product but this kind of approach can be a good way to test a course or website or document. Just "dump" your existing knowledge and assumptions and then try using the item. You will get better results with someone who actually doesn't have your existing knowledge but it can go pretty far towards helping you find some obvious things that you might overlook because you are too close to it.

(Note: Another thing to learn is that, if you are going to complain about a website being hard to use, do it right away...sometimes they fix it in the interim. The Toro site is now (4/29) really, really, excellent. Really, it's great. I should be happy about that.)

Thank you for your interest in PRH Consulting! For more about our company, approach, and experience, please visit our website at www.prhconsulting.com.

We hope you think of us the next time you need help improving or supporting performance.

Sincerely,

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