When Learning becomes Performance Support

Free Briefing Paper

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Introduction

There has been a great deal of interest in recent years in the concept of performance support systems. In essence, this means providing all the knowledge a person needs to carry out a task without interrupting their workflow. Not surprisingly, it's often referred to as workflow learning and in the e-learning world it has been dominated by the growing interest in embedding just-in-time systems and procedural hints and tips.

None of this is very new as a concept. Anyone who has worked in a call centre will be familiar with the onscreen guides you get to help answer caller enquiries. What's new is the greater spread of work aids to the rest of the organisation. And it is not just processes and procedures that are coming to our desktops. Areas that were normally covered in traditional classroom training are being embedded within the everyday workflow.

The drive for this quick just-in-time knowledge provision is the need for quick decision-making and a reluctance to herd staff into classrooms for *just-in-case* learning covering the sort of details that will never stick for more than a few minutes.

With time at a premium, a great deal of the knowledge we need is going to have to be provided directly within the workplace. This is reinforced by market analyst Keynote, who in their 2005 training review noted the **scarcity of time available for training** in organisations. It seems increasingly to be the case that people simply don't have the time to spend days on training courses. Organisations are looking for shorter training events and for ways of integrating learning into the day job.

This has legitimately given rise to a growing demand for performance support systems that move learning and knowledge from the classroom into the workplace and the actual workflow.

The only problem is that is difficult for many to distinguish the difference between traditional structured learning interventions and what is required in an on-the-job performance support environment.

In our experience, many organisations are simply renaming their learning management systems or knowledge resources as performance centres, rather than changing the way learning is integrated into the workplace.

This paper sets out our views on performance support and why it is different from traditional learning models. We'd love to hear your views after you have read it.

Steve Rayson and Mark Harrison

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What do we mean by Performance Support?

Why is it different from learning and knowledge?

In his book on e-learning Marc Rosenberg drew on the work of Gloria Gery to develop a very useful distinction between learning, knowledge and performance support. We have developed this further and would put forward the following distinctions.

Structured Learning	Knowledge Provision	Performance Support
Goal is to transfer knowledge and skill	Goal is to be a resource to the user	Goal is to support performance directly
Programme determines how the user will learn	Users determines how to learn and use resources	Task determines how the performance object is designed
Interruption from work, even if online	Interruption, though less than training	Designed to integrate with work as part of performing tasks
Aim is to instruct and provide learning interventions	Purpose is to inform	Focus is on guiding performance directly

On paper, the distinction can seem quite clear.

The traditional idea of **training** (now under the more acceptable moniker of '**learning**') is an oasis from the busy workplace; a place to reflect and practice in a safe environment emerging with a strong purpose and a game plan for the real world.

Knowledge provision is a more recently addition to the L&D landscape – ideal for the self motivated knowledge worker who likes to seek out the underpinning information they need to get that extra edge. It is a core component on any leadership or senior management programme as they don't like being told anything and will certainly not show themselves up in any public situation!

For many **Performance Support** is simply the presentation of things you can't 'learn' but need to refer to, as you do your job.

Simple performance support aids such as 'how to use a computer system' or 'follow a detailed process', do indeed fit this description but, strictly, high performance is not just following the right steps. It also involves **judgement**, **decision-making** and applying effective **behaviours** in specific situations.

This is where the distinction blurs because that needs knowledge and skills embedded in your performance support model.

The really effective performance support tool now has to show you **what you need to do** and show you **how to do it** at the same time. This means we have to be very clever in the way we set up our performance support tools and it's clear that this is proving to be a real challenge for many within the learning and development community.

The Performance Support Centre – More than 'just in time' resources

The simple fact is that many organisations have gone for a simple approach of renaming their learning management system a performance support centre. This obviously misses the point as they just become a repository for traditional learning interventions – a case of Emperor's new clothes.

For us, a performance support centre is a very focused set of resources, normally designed for a specific job role, which include performance objects to support staff in fulfilling key tasks. The performance support centre is designed to improve performance of either a specific function or job role.

A portal with 200 learning courses and hundreds of knowledge objects is not a performance support centre. It lacks focus and is not oriented specifically to performance improvement. The real value of a performance support centre is in the work that has been undertaken to identify high performance in the particular job role or area, and the thinking that has gone behind the tools and resources which are included in the performance centre to help achieve that high performance.

Performance support tools should be about improving performance

In any organisation or industry performance tends to be spread as follows:
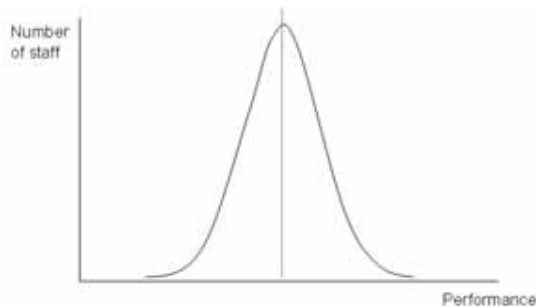
Thus most staff are average performers with some staff performing at lower levels and some staff performing at very high levels. Thus there is a performance gap between those high performers and the average performer.

Any performance support must be based on the behaviours of high performing staff. You have to try to identify and model the knowledge and behaviours which make them such high performers. The performance support tools must therefore be designed to help close the performance gap or improve average performance. This won't happen if all they are is a set of steps to follow and a checklist you need to complete.

Models of high performance must be embedded in all the performance support tools you develop and so, in essence, the ideal performance support tool will offer:

- The key model behaviours normally introduced in structured **learning** interventions
- The underpinning **knowledge** that high performers also possess
- The practical 'how to' elements of performing tasks – the traditional model of **performance support**

Less is more

We have Google to search the whole web for information and news. Why therefore do we go to a particular news site or information site? We go because there is simply too much information on the web, and we get value where someone has performed an editorial task and selected relevant news stories or information.

The success of news or specialist sites is that they provide a much faster editorial summary of key issues. In our view, it is the same with a performance support centre.

You get less value from a site which has 100 top management theories than from one which has carefully selected the 3 key management theories which are relevant to your job role or the task you need to deal with. You get even more value if the centre has developed the learning and knowledge into a series of performance objects.

What is a Performance Object?

A performance object differs from a learning object or knowledge object in that it is designed to support a learner with a particular task in a practical way. The easiest way to explain this is through an example. If we take a manager who is managing a change project we might provide, in an online performance support centre, some learning on change management, some core knowledge on particular theories and some practical performance advice on how to take their own project forward.

Learning object	Knowledge object	Performance object
Theory about managing change. Case study material and clarity on benefits of particular approaches	Brief details on Kotter's stages for managing a change project eg to develop a guiding coalition	Guide and template to use for stakeholder analysis, tools for influencing and getting buy in

A traditional e-learning programme on, say appraisals, may be 60 minutes long with various sections such as background, theory, case studies, good practice, etc.

By contrast a performance support centre would focus on the key performance tasks and provide structured support. Thus a performance toolkit on appraisals might be structured into sections such as "I want to..." or "I need to...". For example:

I need to....

- Conduct a performance appraisal where the person is not performing effectively
- Deliver some bad news
- Conduct a performance appraisal for the first time

Each performance object will be short but very task focused.

Thus a performance support system looks at the issue differently and seeks to identify the key tasks that a member of staff is likely to perform. It then constructs short support objects which are task-focused. Thus the learning and knowledge is directly integrated into performing the task.

A performance object will take elements of good practice but make these tasks specific, it might include, for example, *5 top tips* and it might also have guidance on things you shouldn't do, thus *5 key mistakes to avoid*. A performance object might also include a short case study or example. The key is that a performance object is short, fast and focused on the task at hand.

A performance support centre will also have traditional learning and knowledge objects but these will support the performance objects. They provide an opportunity for staff to take things further. They can also be used as part of a more formal development programme. In the case of appraisals these might include:

- the appraisal process
- the rating process
- the interview form
- theory on appraisals
- case studies
- an interactive simulation

Seven Tips on making Performance Support change Performance

1. **See how high performers do things** and identify and model the knowledge and behaviours which make them high performers

2. **Build in the behaviours** of your high performers into the tools and guidance you provide within your performance support

3. Focus on the **critical mistakes** that commonly get made (whether they are judgement-based or process-orientated it doesn't matter) and help people see how they can avoid them (or recover if they have already made that mistake!)

4. **Keep it simple** so it works effectively as a quick, just-in-time aid – but allow deeper exploration if someone wants to know 'Why?'

5. Use **stories and real examples** – from those that the users trust i.e. use the words of the high performers themselves

6. Keep the performance support content **up to date** – appoint custodians who take on this responsibility

7. Continually **check** on how people are using the performance support tools – remove anything that is never used as it will just distract users from the useful stuff

Take it further

We have developed performance support tools for both private and public sector clients and would be delighted to share our experiences further with you.

You may also want to know more about how we actually build performance centres.

If so, please contact us at info@kineo.co.uk or call 0870 383 0003