

# Performance and Performing

**Ryan Watkins**

In most of our discussions about distance learning the distinction between what we *do* and what we *accomplish* is often overshadowed by talk of the latest technology innovations or tactics for increasing our market share. If you are like me and many others, you find that it is typically more stirring to talk about a new software application or techniques used to

increase learner participation, than it is to define the results distance learning is going to deliver for the organization and its external clients, as well as how you should go about evaluating your success. In general, most of us prefer to talk about *performing* rather than *performance*.

Nevertheless, our success is most often judged by our *performance* and not our *performing*. After all, we don't reward cows for standing over the bucket, nor do we reward sales people for keeping a client on the phone all afternoon if it doesn't result in a sale. The same is true in distance education and e-learning; although the processes we use are important, we do not want to be distracted by the number of courses we have online, the latest options in streaming media, or the number of learners we have enrolled. Even if most of us can't be successful without high levels of *performing*, the true value and benefit of distance learning solutions are the *results*, or *ends*, accomplished both in the online classroom and on-the-job.

By clarifying the distinction between *performance* and *performing*, we can influence how we define success and the likelihood that we will achieve it. For many of us involved in training, education, and performance improvement, the focus has traditionally been on the behaviors of our-



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selves and others. This has been done based on the assumption that increasing the efficiency of *performing* (i.e., productivity) will automatically lead to improved effectiveness and valued *performance* (i.e., results). Unfortunately, the relationship between *performing* and *performance* is often thwarted by misguided expectations, inadequate resources, moving performance targets, and other organizational managerial nightmares.

In response, we have experimented with measuring discrete variables of behavior, developing distance learning programs, evaluating employee morale, reengineering processes, moving training to be just-in-time, and a barrage of other well-meaning efforts; always remaining focused on improving how we *perform*, while rarely defining and measuring the required *performance*. For example, we commonly count the number of hits our distance learning Websites have each month or the number of hours in which we have content streaming through satellites, all the while very few of us evaluate our success beyond end-of-course exams or surveys of learner satisfaction.

Complementing our current evaluations of *performing* with the assessment of *performance* is essential for enduring success of distance learning initiatives. Organizational resources will not be expended in the long-term on initiatives that do not demonstrate measurable results for the organization, its clients, and its clients' clients.

Isolating and measuring the results contributed by training and education programs within an organization is essential. This requires, in addition to assessing how

we are *performing*, that we measure our *performance* in terms of the results accomplished through distance learning outside of the online classroom. For example, learner performance on the job, learner contributions to departmental achievements, organizational accomplishments, as well as the success, safety, and satisfaction of the clients and the clients' clients.

*Performance*, when defined as the results of an individual or organization, can be the true measure of success for any distance learning programs. Distinguishing what we *do* from what we *accomplish*, offers training professionals and educators a valuable and unique perspective that is useful when defining criteria for program success, requesting additional funding, making difficult decisions, evaluating accomplishments, designing distance learning courses, and when trying to keep one step ahead of the competition.

Without forgetting the necessity for high levels of *performing*, distance-learning initiatives can benefit from clearly denoting the distinctions between *performance* and *performing*. In other words, the distinction between Ends and Means.

## NOTE

The *Ends and Means* column is based on a feature written by Roger Kaufman throughout the 1980s for the Performance Improvement Journal of the International Society for Performance Improvement. His articles each month informed and inspired many professionals, and it is my goal to continue his tradition of performance-focused articles through my contributions to *Distance Learning*.