

All About Outcomes

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Introduction

New to Human Performance Improvement (HPI)? You may be wondering, “What’s all the fuss about outcomes?” or “Why focus on outcomes first?” These are great questions! The simple answer to both is that outcomes are what matter most to every organization. That’s right—*every* organization.

The purpose of this article is to answer your basic questions about outcomes and explain why they are so important to the field of HPI. We will provide needed background on outcomes to prepare the new HPI practitioner to make the transition to focusing *first* on outcomes—and only *then* on behaviors. Most readers will discover that this transition is not difficult—it really is more a matter of perspective and changing our view of how work gets done.

What are Outcomes?

Let’s begin with a definition. An *outcome* is a *valued accomplishment produced by a job performer that is the end result of behaviors (tasks) and has value to the team or organization.*

In essence, an outcome is like the valued end-result of a process, but at a performer or job level. It is the valued work product that is left behind *after* the work shift is over and the employees go home. Here are some criteria we can apply to help us determine if what we are looking at is an outcome:

- It has value to the organization—it clearly helps contribute to the achievement of an important organizational goal.
- It is measurable—the organization has criteria it uses to measure whether the outcome was produced correctly and in a timely manner.
- It can be used to compare performers, even when they are not present.
- Because it is a thing, it begins with a noun or noun structure (i.e., not a verb).

Every job produces outcomes. The table below illustrates some examples of outcomes for different types of jobs.

| Job | Sample Outcome | Sample Measures |
|------------------|--|--|
| Product Manager | Products developed and ready to ship to retailers for sale | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Within budget (10% + or -)• On schedule• Meets design specifications |
| Technical Writer | Documentation that supports product use and adoption | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Accuracy of steps• Completeness of documentation• Meets readability requirements |

One of the cornerstones of Human Performance Improvement work is that we focus first on *outcomes*, not behaviors. This perspective change is sometimes difficult for newcomers to the field of HPI. After all, many of us took some psychology course about B.F. Skinner and his work in behavioral psychology, and learned something about task analysis that focused on human behaviors. In instructional design classes we are often taught to analyze tasks (i.e., behaviors) before planning and designing training. Many of us work today in organizations that have lists of expected behaviors for each job role. With all of this “behavior on the brain,” many people who are new to HPI have difficulty setting behaviors aside to focus first on outcomes. “What’s the difference?” some of us say. Before we answer that question, let’s look at a little background.

First, a Little Background

Thomas F. Gilbert is widely accepted as the father of the field of human performance technology (also known as human performance improvement). He was a psychologist and student of B.F. Skinner and was trained in the principles of behaviorism, just like many of us.

However, Gilbert felt that we focused too much on behaviors—the things people *do*—and not enough on the *results* of their actions. He debated this point often with B.F. Skinner. He called this mindset the “cult of behavior.” He argued that this myopic emphasis on behaviors made it more difficult to quickly zero in on the real problem. In addition, it did little to help us build credibility with clients and convince them that we were focused on their business results. Instead, he argued that we should be focused first on worthy accomplishments, or what we call *outcomes* today, that have value to the organization in which they are produced. He wrote a now-classic book, *Human Competence: Engineering Worthy Performance*, which described how performance engineers or analysts can help organizations solve performance problems and achieve measurable results.

One of Gilbert’s most important ideas was his emphasis on examining the *products* of behavior, when trying to improve performance. With this concept, he provided the previously missing link between individual or team behavior and the business goals or results of an organization. He called these products valuable accomplishments.

Although some people still refer to these work products as accomplishments, we use the word *outcomes* to describe them because the word outcomes has real meaning for business people. It is easy for a client who already speaks about the outcomes of a strategy or an initiative, to understand that job performers produce outcomes that in turn, contribute to business results. To summarize, an

Why the Emphasis on Outcomes First?

We started this article with a similar question and a simple answer: outcomes matter most to every organization. If people in jobs don’t produce outcomes of value, then the organization

can't achieve its important goals. And because the goals were not met, the organization can't produce the results it needs, and it is not very successful.

The problem: When we focus more on behaviors and what people do, not on what they produce, we become mired down in minutiae that may not matter. We measure their performance on what they 'do', instead of on the valued results they produce. And then we wonder why the behaviors were so good, but the organization didn't get the desired results.

We focus on teaching people what to 'do,' but not on what they are supposed to be producing. As long as learning and talent development professionals focus on behaviors, we will continue to get mediocre improvement in performance. Without the context of valued outcomes, focusing on behaviors can be incomplete, misleading, and require a lot more time.

By identifying the outcomes for a job and determining which of these produce value for the organization, the performance consultant or analyst maintains a focus on value creation. We can spend our limited analysis time investigating the outcomes that matter to the organization, and then examining the behaviors used to produce them.

Businesses want results! To engineer and improve performance, we must understand what outcomes the business *requires* of a job role—in other words, what really matters. And if you talk to the people in a job role who are already delivering above-standard results, they are very aware of which of their outcomes matter most to their organization. The job outcomes become the links between the individual performer level of the organization and the goals or results the organization wants to deliver.

People want results, too! Most of us come to work every day and want to do a good job, but HR professionals, our managers, and others in leadership roles typically doesn't define jobs in terms of the outcomes they want us to produce. Instead, they give us a long list of responsibilities and competencies that we must be able to 'do'. It's no wonder that we get bogged down, lose interest and focus, or disengage. In other words, outcomes are important for *both* the organization and individuals. Here's a little story to illustrate what we mean. You may have heard it before as the story of the three masons.

The Story of the 3 Masons

Imagine that we observed three masons, laboring away on chunks of granite from large blocks. We notice that the first mason seems frustrated and unhappy, chipping away the granite and frequently looking at his watch. We ask, "Tell me about your job." He responds, "I am hammering on this stupid rock, like I have been doing all day, and I can't wait until I can go home for the day."

We walk over to the second mason, who seems more interested in his work and is hammering quite diligently. We ask, "Tell me about your job." He stops and answers us, "Well, I am molding this block of rock so that it is the same as the others and can be used to construct a wall. It's not bad work, and I am happy to have the job, but I will be glad when it is done."

We turn our attention to the third mason, who is hammering at the block with gusto, then stepping back to admire his work. He comes back to chip off small pieces until he seemed satisfied. We ask, “Tell me about your work.” He stops, looks skyward, and proclaims, “A cathedral—that’s what I’m making! It will bring solace and comfort to many people, and I am so grateful to be on this project.”

As this story illustrates, when we (as job performers) look at our jobs based on the outcomes we produce, it is much easier to find clarity in the value of our work and what we do for our organizations. Not only does this perspective help us focus on what really matters, but it also helps us find purpose in our work. As a job performer, it is personally rewarding to be producing something of ‘real value,’ and not just ‘doing tasks.’

From an organizational perspective, linking what performers do to the desired results helps people find purpose in their work, improves motivation, and helps drive business success. In fact, we have often had it happen that at the end of an outcomes interview with a key performer, he or she will say something like, “Wow! May I get a copy of what we have worked through today? I have never really thought about my job from this perspective before, and it has really energized me!”

Now, Look at Behaviors

One of the things we want to make very clear is that we are not saying that behaviors are not important—you certainly can’t produce an outcome without doing at least one of them! But outcomes (or results) are the most important to our client in the end, so we start with them and look at the behaviors that support producing these outcomes next.

Once we understand the important work products that the job must produce, we can examine the behaviors (both overt and covert) that the key performers do to produce the outcomes. Outcomes give us a context in which we determine the behaviors that are important, enabling us to use our precious analysis time on what really needs attention. Instead of analyzing *every* task or behavior, we start with those that are required to produce the outcomes of value to the organization. In doing so, we continue to build the linkages between what must be done to produce the outcomes that in turn, help the business meet its goals and achieve results, as Figure 1 indicates.



Figure 1. Behaviors Lead to Outcomes, Which Lead to Business Goals and Results

As any of us who have conducted task analysis know, in every job there are often hundreds of behaviors or tasks, and some of these behaviors always end up being more important than others. But at the beginning of an analysis it is nearly impossible to guess *which* behaviors are the most important ones.

To solve this problem, we have used outcomes as a filtering mechanism to sort through the many possible behaviors of the job to help us focus on the ones required to produce the most important outcomes first. Then, we can focus on the behaviors that must be done to produce the important outcomes. In addition, as we do so, we are not interviewing or observing just any performer to discover these behaviors. We are looking at the key performers. We recognize that key performers often do things differently, and part of our task is to discover what they ‘do’ differently to produce such different results. Once we understand this, we can help the organization use this knowledge to create solutions that help others in the same job role improve their capability to produce these important outcomes.

Summary

In this article we have defined outcomes, described some HPI background about how they originated, and made the case for why we look at outcomes first during an HPI analysis.

An outcome is a valued accomplishment produced by a job performer that is the end result of behaviors and has value to the team or organization. All jobs have outcomes that can be measured against criteria appropriate to the job. Valued outcomes for different jobs in the organization enable the organization to achieve its goals and deliver business results.

Organizations exist to accomplish their goals and deliver long-term results. That is the difference between being ‘good’ and ‘great,’ or more simply, between organizational success and failure. Organizations that equip their performers and provide adequate support to produce the needed outcomes drive workplace performance that leads to goal achievement.

We look at outcomes first because they are what matters to the organization and the job performer. When we approach improving performance from the perspective of outcomes, we forge the link between individual job roles and business results. Additionally, by looking at outcomes first, we create a context that we can use to prioritize our limited analysis time. This enables us to determine which outcomes should be further analyzed to identify the behaviors performed to produce the outcomes.

References

Gilbert, T. F. *Human Competence: Engineering Worthy Performance*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1978.

About the Authors



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Karen's educational background is in the fields of Psychology and Curriculum and Instruction. In addition, she is certified in the use of tools such as the Golden Personality Profiler, Insights, and Myers-Briggs. She is a co-author of ATD's *Performance DNA* methodology, the *EASE Change Management Toolkit*, and a human capital management scorecard. She has published 6 books and over 50 articles in topics ranging from knowledge engineering and human performance analysis, to change management, collaboration, leadership, and process improvement.



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He is also the co-author and publisher of *Performance DNA* with the Association for Talent Development (ATD), analysis tools used by over 7,500 HPI analysts worldwide. Dennis has published over 22 articles in the field of HPI and his work in HPI has been cited in at least 8 other books on human performance. Dennis' delivers public and corporate workshops for PPP and ATD worldwide and he co-authored the successful book *Breaking Tape – 7 Steps to Winning at Work and Life*.

Dennis lives and works in the mountains of western North Carolina where he hikes mountain trails with his wife and two dogs, occasionally tinkering with classic autos in his garage.