



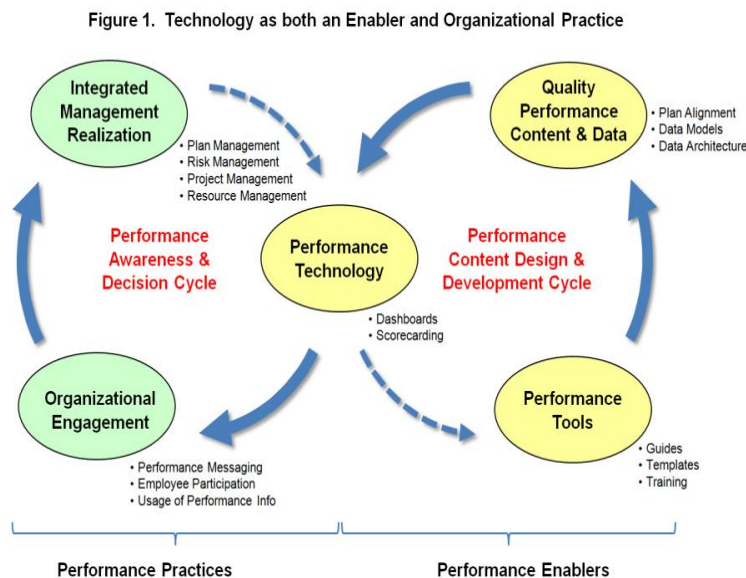
The Role of Technology in Building a Departmental Performance Culture

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Winston Churchill is often cited with his quotation “No matter how beautiful the strategy, you should occasionally look at the results”.

Since the inception of the Report of Plans and Priorities (RPP) and the Departmental Performance Report (DPR) processes in the mid-late 90’s, all federal government departments and agencies have been improving the way strategic and business planning is done. However, few organizations have truly embedded performance thinking into everyday decision making. Performance monitoring and reporting is still often considered a “necessary evil” to meet either departmental or central agency compliance reporting requirements. Part of the frustration managers have is that responding to performance based requests is generally time consuming, tedious, and error-prone.

Advances in performance management technologies offer the promise of readily accessible information around the planning, monitoring and reporting processes central to any department’s ability to achieve organizational success. As we all know however, technology can only be as useful as the quality of the information supplied. To design and develop high-quality performance content requires both a sound understanding of fundamental performance management principles and the availability/use of consistent performance tools like standardized guides, templates and supportive training. Once this content is available and can be used effectively to assist with decision making, wide-spread employee understanding and engagement usually follows. The conundrum however is how to get and sustain the necessary organizational engagement to undertake the development efforts towards building well aligned performance content.



Performance technology provides the vital link for both building and deploying quality performance content. Figure 1 shows how performance technology like dashboards or scorecarding is a key component in both the “performance content design and development cycle” and the “performance awareness and decision cycle”. Utilizing technology not only helps clarify the performance management requirements and the requisite supporting performance data, but enables employees at all levels to better visualize gaps or disconnects that may require additional refinement. It turns the theoretical value into practical information, the conceptual approaches into reality-based practices, and the promises of performance management into hard deliverables.

To succeed in utilizing technology to improve organizational awareness and acceptance, “baby steps” is the name of the game. Each advance in the use of technology needs to be preceded by an increase in organizational learning. Similarly, each enhancement in performance understanding should be reinforced through the use of technology thereby ensuring these advancements get “institutionalized”. Figure 2 shows the need to balance the progress in performance understanding with the evolution of performance technology usage. Adapted from the work of Howard Dresner who is considered the father of “Business Intelligence” and one of the key thought-leaders in the use of performance information, it shows the relationship and ultimate end-states associated with building quality performance content and deploying effective performance technology. To migrate from a stoic management environment, one needs either new business approaches or improved responsiveness via the application of technology. Taking a unidirectional approach on either path however, can often result in a sub-optimal endpoint. Too much conceptual education without practical

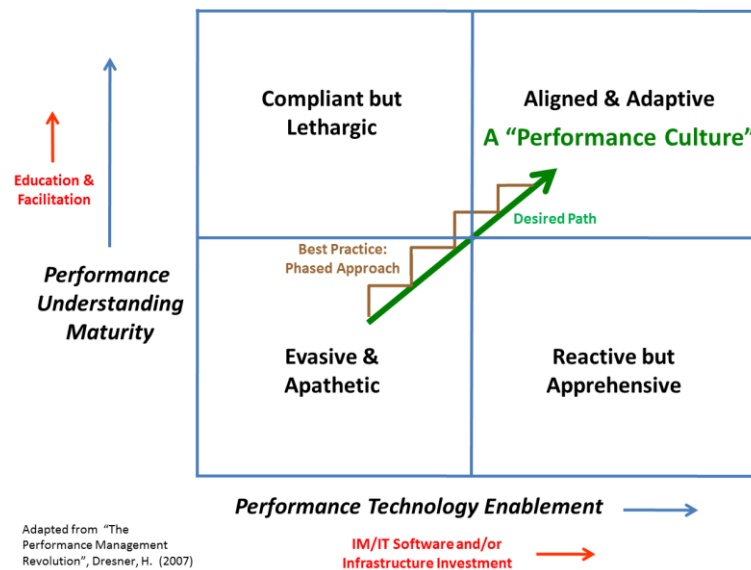
hands-on reinforcement often leads to a passive culture where rules and procedures rule the day and staff engagement is lost under the weight of the protocols to be adhered to. Applying technology in isolation however, is also very risk prone as it generally results in managers being nervous and fearful of their next move, while staff become confused on what performance information is to be captured and how it would be used to support day-to-day operations.

Moving too far down either path can also create barriers that can actually limit or even kill advancements on the other axis. An example is some work done about 10 years ago within a large federal department who were at that time looking to implement a type of “Balanced Scorecard”. After an extensive two year training, consulting and facilitation program across the department, an approach was developed that was so unique and specific it was felt no existing performance technologies could meet all the conceptual requirements. The department then embarked on a multi-million dollar “in-house build” project to create the ultimate technology solution to meet their needs. After an additional two years, the project was cancelled due to lack of progress and ultimately lack of organizational engagement. The lesson...without understanding the technology options ahead of time and crafting content to best suit a viable solution, the best performance concepts in the world can be ineffective and actually work against the development of enterprise wide acceptance and engagement. The trick, as Stephen Covey would say is “Begin with the End in Mind”.

These days, there are a wide variety of leading-edge performance technologies from which to choose. In many cases, departments either have a technology infrastructure that can be easily extended to take advantage of a number of high-quality solutions or have performance technologies already installed, and perhaps implemented, within one or more program units. For the most part, although each technology will have its own strengths and weaknesses, all performance software has much of the core functionality required to properly visualize performance relationships and supporting data. The bottom line...most organizations can (and should) leverage what they already own or can easily acquire without turning a performance enhancement project into a major technology acquisition/procurement. A careful assessment of the organizational gaps in performance understanding and performance content development hand-in-hand with a review of exactly what technologies the organization has at its disposal and what capabilities exist within these technologies should be the first step before embarking on any major performance improvement initiative.

In upcoming issues, I will talk about the role of specific methodologies/technologies like dashboarding or scorecarding, review “best practices” for implementation within the public sector, discuss practical means for gauging organization performance maturity, and present a “Performance Roadmap” to help organizations accelerate their journey towards building an enhanced “Performance Culture”.

Figure 2. Balancing the Investment in Performance Concepts & Technology



Mike Haley is President of Landmark Decisions Inc., a niche management consulting firm focused on delivering “Performance Alignment Solutions” to a wide range of organizations in both the private and public sector. Over the past 20 years, he has worked extensively in applying performance planning frameworks and performance scorecarding through training and implementation services which help build and sustain performance management systems in both intra-departmental (i.e. corporate, program, policies) and inter-departmental (i.e. horizontal initiatives and strategic partnerships) organizations. Mike can be reached at mhaley@landmark.ca or 1.902.835.7861