

Knowledge Worker

Good People in A Bad System

(December 2018)

Introduction

In this year's August column, I introduced the [Quality of Performance Matrix](#), which arrays good and bad performers against good and bad systems. That idea owes to a famous statement by Geary Rummler that appears in Ron Zemke's 1983 profile of Geary in *TRAINING* magazine's "Training People" series. Ron quoted Geary as saying, "You put a good performer in a bad system and the system wins every time."¹ Worth noting is that Geary added, "Understanding the performer isn't enough; you have to manage the system to effect real change in results." A story about a problem I encountered some years ago illustrates both of Geary's points and is the subject of this month's column.

The Reject Rate Problem

The organization in question provided educational testing and other assessment services. One of the many programs it offered was a certification test for people seeking employment in the healthcare industry. People had to register for, take and pass the test as part of becoming certified. Certification was a condition of employment. Many of the registration forms had to be returned to the registrants, forcing them to register for a later administration, in turn delaying their certification, employment and income. The registrants whose registration forms were returned complained to the program sponsor who then complained to the testing company. There, the managers of the testing program complained to the manager of the operation where the registration forms were processed. The head of the division that processed the registration forms asked me to look into what he called "the reject rate problem." He said the reject rate was much too high and he wanted me to see what I could do to get it down. When I asked by how much, he said simply, "As low as you can get it." I set out to see what I could discover.

The Investigation

The young fellow in charge of the operation in question informed me that the reject rate for registration forms was running on average about 70 percent. About half of the rejected forms could be reworked by his clerical staff and then successfully processed, although at considerable cost and effort, but roughly half of the rejected forms had to be returned to the registrants. The clerical staff was convinced the registrants couldn't fill out the registration form properly if their lives depended on it.

A little additional digging revealed that the 70 percent reject rate was about evenly split between errors involving a field requiring a code identifying the institution where the registrant had been trained, and a host of other randomly distributed errors amounting to just plain carelessness, suggesting a lackadaisical attitude toward filling out the form.

More investigation revealed two very important points: (1) nowhere were the registrants advised of the consequences of failing to completely and correctly fill out the registration form; and (2) the institutional code list provided to the registrants was in numerical order, which was useful to the clerical staff at the testing company, who often needed to know the institutional name associated with a given code, but the registrants, who needed to find a code associated with a given institution, required a code list

¹ Thanks to Rick Rummler for informing me about the source of the quote so often attributed to Geary.

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organized in alphabetical order by institution name. Not being able to easily find the correct code in the numerically organized list, I suspected they simply turned in the registration form without it.

The Solution

The general form of the solution seemed obvious: make certain that the registrants understood the consequences to them of failure to completely and correctly fill out the registration form and provide them with an institutional code list organized by institution name.

Subsequently, the instructions accompanying the registration form were rewritten to include (1) examples of properly filled out fields and (2) a clear explanation of the consequences of the failure to do so. In addition, an alphabetically organized institutional code list was prepared and made available to registrants. The program managers were reluctant to incur the costs associated with revising the registration form instructions and reformatting the code list, but when apprised of the costs of the failure to do, including continued complaints from test takers and the program sponsor, they agreed to implement the solution.

The Evaluation

Once the revised instructions and code list were distributed, close attention was paid to the reject rate. On the very next test administration, the reject rate plummeted from 70 percent to less than 9 percent and stayed there for subsequent administrations. When the division director was asked if he would like to see if the reject rate could be taken lower, he replied that he had other, bigger fish to fry.

As a result of reducing the reject rate, the rework costs of the operation in question were reduced by almost \$200,000.00 on an annual basis, clerical staff doing rework were freed up to work on other issues, and the complaints from registrants and the program sponsor all but disappeared, making the program managers very happy.

Reflections

The registrants were good people caught up in a bad system. The registrants did not lack the necessary knowledge or skills to properly fill out the registration form. They were in fact quite literate. What they lacked was (1) information about the consequences to them of failing to correctly and completely fill out the form and (2) an institutional code list that enabled them to determine the correct institutional code. Correcting these two “system glitches” solved the reject rate problem.

Finally, to drive home Geary’s point about having to manage the system to effect real change in results, consider this: not once while investigating or solving the reject rate problem did I speak with a registrant; instead, I focused on “the system” – and on applying what I know about human behavior and performance.

Reference

Zemke, R., “Geary Rummler: Training Still Isn’t Enough.” *TRAINING*, 1983, 20(8), 75-76.

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About the Author

Fred Nickols is a knowledge worker, writer, consultant, and former executive who spent 20 years in the U.S. Navy, retiring as a decorated chief petty officer. In the private sector, he worked as a consultant and then held executive positions with two former clients. Currently, Fred is the managing partner of [Distance Consulting LLC](#). His website is home to the award-winning [Knowledge Workers' Tool Room](#) and more than 200 free articles, book chapters, and papers. Fred is a longtime member of ISPI and writes this monthly column for *PerformanceXpress*.