

# Knowledge Worker

## Two Keys to Improving Productivity through Training

(December 2013)

I was working on a project for a client when I was asked to take a look at their correspondence unit, which was charged with replying to written inquiries. The client wanted to know if I could spot any obvious ways of making it more efficient. The costs of handling written inquiries were many times the costs of handling a telephone inquiry and the division director wanted to know if anything could be done to reduce those costs.

I stopped by the unit one day, introduced myself to the unit supervisor (who was expecting me) and she showed me around. As I recall, there were about six people in the unit. Much of the work involved reading an inquiry and then sending out a more or less “canned response.” Some of the work was more complicated and required drafting a letter then getting it approved, signed and sent out. After a couple of hours I excused myself and went to the division director’s office. “Well?” he said.

“Shut it down,” I replied. “Convert those letter inquiries to phone calls. When you get a letter inquiry send them back a postcard with the 800 number for telephone inquiries.” Shortly thereafter that is exactly what he did. He didn’t just reduce the costs of that operation, he eliminated them.

That little vignette illustrates one of the key things to look for when setting out to improve performance and productivity; namely, *work being done that shouldn’t be done at all*.

The next vignette illustrates a second key thing to look for.

The primary project I was working on when I was asked to investigate the correspondence unit had come to me by way of a referral from Booz Allen & Hamilton. Booz Allen told the client I could improve productivity through training and I had been brought in to do that. As was my custom, I began the project by doing a little “poking around,” familiarizing myself with the operation, the work and its people.

The operation in question was a resolution unit. The organization received forms that had been filled out by applicants. The information from these forms was keyed into the system then edited by the computer. Forms that failed any of the edits were suspended for manual resolution. My “poking around” the morning of my first day on site consisted of observing some of the clerical personnel who resolved the forms that had been suspended from processing.

Every now and then I noticed that a clerk would reach for a three-ring binder, refer to it, then make notes on the correction document and place it in the completed pile. I waited and the next time a clerk reached for that binder I moved to his side and said, “Excuse me but I’ve noticed that periodically you refer to that binder. Might I ask what you use it for?”

“Sure,” he replied. He pointed to an item on the correction document that accompanied the original form that had failed the edits and said, “See this item?” I nodded and he continued, “Well, I could have gotten this CORRDOC (their abbreviation for correction document) for any one of five reasons. This

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binder contains the edit logic. I use it to go over the form and check to see which of the five edits it failed.” I thanked him and continued on my way to the project kick-off meeting.

After the customary introductions and project overview by the division director, he turned the meeting over to me. I told them that I had been poking around for a couple of hours prior to the meeting and had come across something that puzzled me. I related the story about observing the clerks referring to the three-ring binder and then I said, “It seems to me that the computer knows which edit failed and that it would be a simple matter to print a number identifying the edit. That way the resolution clerk would know immediately what corrective action to take without having to rerun the edits manually.”

A fellow down the table from me who later turned out to be the head of the systems area supporting the unit leaned out, looked at me, and said, “I don’t see any problem. We can do that.”

At this point, one of the supervisors of the clerical unit sitting next to me looked down the table at him and exclaimed, “What? You mean to tell me that for all these years we have had to figure out why we got that edit and you could have told us all along?”

Discretion proving the better part of valor the head of systems said nothing and the meeting moved on.

The subsequent project took the form of developing algorithmic job aids for use by the resolution clerks and training them in the use of those job aids. The cost savings of eliminating the manual reruns of the edit turned out to be enough to pay for the entire project. Talk about the ROI of training!

In this second vignette lies the second thing to look for: *work that is being done twice*.

I’m a firm believer in giving credit where credit is due and in this case credit goes to a fellow by the name of David Dean. At the time he was a consultant at Booz Allen and the person who had recommended me for the project in question. He and I had worked together on a project a year earlier. Upon being apprised of the client’s interest in the project and the Booz Allen referral, I called David, thanked him, and informed him that this was the first time I had ever been asked outright to improve productivity through training. Did he have any suggestions, I wanted to know. David’s reply has stood me in good stead for many years now.

“Look for two things,” he said. “One is work being done twice and the other is work being done that shouldn’t be done at all.” David’s advice to me is still good counsel for those who want to improve productivity through training.

### About the Author

Fred Nickols, CPT, 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 manager partner of [Distance Consulting LLC](#). His website is home to the award-winning [Knowledge Worker’s Tool](#)

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