



Front-End Analysis, Implementation Planning, and Evaluation: Breaking Out of the Pamela Syndrome

by Harold D. Stolovitch

Last Saturday, I watched, intrigued, as four-year-old Pamela painstakingly put together a hundred-piece puzzle. The concentration, the frustration, the energy. The attempts to match color, shape, and pattern. Finally, the transcendent joy of success as Pamela triumphantly fit in the last piece. After a long and arduous struggle, she finally succeeded in achieving her goal, despite all obstacles and adversity. As Pamela sat gazing at her completed puzzle, I leaned over and softly asked what she was going to do with it. She stared at me for a few moments, blinked, and then, with a patient sigh—due, no doubt, to my obvious ignorance—informed me in a patronizing manner, “It’ll go back in the box and onto my puzzle shelf.” Marrying action to word, she pulled apart the puzzle she had been working on for so long and with so much effort, stuffed chunks of it into the box, placed it on her special puzzle shelf, drew another one down, and began afresh....

There is something inherently fascinating about putting things together. In the field of learning and performance, this attraction manifests itself very obviously in the time, effort, and resources we expend to create and build interventions. There is the rush and thrill we experience when we receive the green light to develop the training, create the performance-support tools, produce the job aid, or set up the new knowledge management system. The work is intense. Drawing together all the disparate elements is a challenging, frustrating, yet in the end, exhilarating experience. We analyze, design, redesign, develop, try out, revise, and finally produce our learning or performance products. We have succeeded! We have completed the puzzle. Then, like Pamela, too often we place our latest

masterpiece on the shelf, where, after a short time, it gets forgotten in the excitement of the next new challenge.

On Front-End Analysis, Implementation Planning, and Evaluation

One of the toughest tasks I encounter is getting my clients, and sometimes even my colleagues, to focus on what appear to be the less-glamorous activities of performance improvement: front-end analysis, implementation planning, and evaluation. Of course we all acknowledge how important these are. After all, every design and development model includes these three key elements. Yet when the new project is launched, we often find little more than lip service paid to these critical activities. Let me spend a moment on each of them.

Front-End Analysis

Is there any human performance consultant who does not insist that the front-end analysis (FEA), the initial systematic diagnosis of “the gap,” is an essential step? Yet after almost 40 years in the learning and performance support field, I rarely encounter well-executed FEAs. Why is it such a hard sell, such a pitched battle to convince clients of the critical importance of this vital set of activities? After all, it is FEA that establishes in a data-based way whether there is a gap between desired and actual performance, how this gap relates to business needs, and how important the gap is (magnitude, value, urgency). FEA identifies the factors affecting the gap and appropriate economical, feasible, acceptable solutions for eliminating it.

After much investigating and soul searching, I have come up with the answer to this apparent conundrum. It is because of client impatience to get the job done (and our fear that if we do not get busy doing it, the client will go elsewhere) and it is not as immediately reinforcing as developing an intervention. Like puzzles, it is more overtly rewarding to build the thing than to qualify and quantify gaps. At the end of an FEA, you have uncovered a great deal of information. Often you find out that making something, usually training, is either not necessary (dangerous conclusion) or insufficient (annoying conclusion). What joy and excitement is there in that? Certainly not as much as in designing and developing an electronic product complete with color and animation. In addition, not only do training groups, clients, and managers acquire a palpable product, but they also get to check off boxes showing that the planned-for learning and performance interventions have been completed. FEA simply does not seem to offer the same thrill.

Implementation Planning

Like FEA, implementation planning does not usually elicit a rush of creative excitement. This step focuses on the nuts and bolts of smoothly operationalizing whatever has been created. A number of years ago, I watched in fascinated horror as a large auto manufacturing company poured millions of dollars into a computer-based learning system that stumbled and finally fell.

That may have been the most dramatically poor implementation planning case I ever experienced. Nevertheless, I am consistently amazed at the enthusiasm and effort everyone is willing to expend on creating "things." I rarely encounter the same level of excitement toward planning and preparing for their implementation. Somehow, figuring out schedules, calculating available hours, counting manuals, and determining storage facilities or equipment requirements does not arouse the enthusiasm that making a training video or electronic performance support system does. Yet, when we analyze why our incredibly appropriate, creative solutions are not being used, we soon discover the myriad implementation obstacles we had not foreseen: production quota pressures, personnel cutbacks, new business priorities, insufficient equipment, travel restrictions, lack of supervisor preparation, and many more. Keep in mind that even the best training program poorly implemented has a lower probability of success than a not so well designed program brilliantly implemented. This is also true for any performance intervention.

Evaluation

The only reason we create learning and performance interventions is to produce desired accomplishments efficiently. But how do we know when we have achieved success? The answer: through evaluation.

Every time we read a study or report about the evaluation of training or performance interventions, we learn (or at least

rediscover) that other than using smile sheets, very little of what we produce and implement gets properly evaluated. The most recent report from the American Society for Training and Development suggests that little more than 10% of all workplace training receives any form of payoff evaluation. From my examination of the literature and review of so-called impact and return-on-investment studies, I would estimate the percentage to be significantly lower. In my own projects, evaluation is a tough sell. Cost, time, resources, management pressures, and lack of understanding of the benefits that evaluation data can provide are the main reasons for not committing to a thorough evaluation of what our creative learning and performance interventions produce. Then, of course, there is always the magnetic draw of the next looming project....

What To Do

Despite this somewhat jaded portrait I have been painting, there is a great deal we should and can be doing. Allow me to continue on a more upbeat, optimistic note. I begin with my list of "shoulds."

Should-Dos

1. Accept responsibility. If too much attention is being placed on building interventions and not enough on FEA, implementation planning, and evaluation, I contend that we as human performance professionals are largely to blame. Business-minded people know that prior to investing in any venture, they have to conduct research and create a business case. So do we in the workplace learning and performance arena. It is our responsibility to provide our clients with clear arguments, precedents, and examples of the value of FEA, implementation planning, and evaluation. We have to turn our own inclinations away from the exciting design and development events and, while not neglecting them, raise our motivation to emphasize the less-glamorous, but often more critical ones we have ignored.

2. Educate ourselves. I was partly horrified, partly amused when I designed and ran a FEA at a large real estate corporation some years back. The client asked me to involve a half dozen of his instructional designers in the effort as a learning experience. They all had master's degrees in instructional technology or human resource development. They were intrigued by the process and soon became very excited about it. In one of our early meetings, they all agreed that they had learned of such activities in their university curricula, but had not thought people actually did this "in the real world." Several had been working in industry for a dozen years or more!

Surveys of learning and performance practitioners demonstrate over and over again how few of us really know how to conduct proper FEAs, build effective implementation plans, or carry out comprehensive evaluations. As a major "should," it is time we became more informed about what we are supposed to know and do.

3. Fight for more respect. As a professional group, we are often brought very late into a corporate project, given limited

budgets and mandates, and then shackled with impossible deadlines. This is not done out of malice, but out of a lack of understanding and even a lack of respect for our perceived contributions. We are viewed tactically rather than strategically. It is time we demonstrate what we can do beyond merely building things. It is time to show, with data, that we have the potential to contribute far beyond what many of our clients imagine.

4. Seek out opportunities. We all know the expression, “If you always do what you’ve always done, you’ll always get what you’ve always got.” We have not pushed hard enough to identify opportunities to perform FEAs, to insist on devising strong implementation plans, or to integrate sound evaluation methods and worth/ROI calculations for what we create. Every project has the potential to stretch further in these three areas. It is up to us to seek the opportunities and make the most of them.

5. Demonstrate results. Long ago, we established our ability to create intriguing training and performance products. We have shown that we can leap from one medium and delivery system to the next with ease. Recently, I sorted through boxes of materials my associates and I had developed over the years. We found among our archival treasures programmed instruction manuals, audiovisual programs, audio- and video-based packages, interactive telephone testing kits, computer-based learning software, multimedia, intelligent tutoring modules, board games, simulation and roleplay kits, and, of most recent vintage, e-learning modules that integrated a variety of interactive, synchronous, and asynchronous components. So many of us can demonstrate our abilities to design and develop wonderful interventions. When it comes to accompanying our marvelous creations with data on results, however, how quickly our pile of artifacts shrinks!

Can-Dos

With respect to what we *can* do, here is my starter list of recommendations:

1. Seize the initiative on projects whether we are internal to the organization or an external resource. Critically examine work requests, early project plans, and requests for proposals to identify weaknesses in the front-end logic and opportunities to demonstrate the value of strong implementation planning. Emphasize the steps beyond design and development that lead to desired performance results. Assume the responsibility of project success, but insist on all the necessary activities that will ensure desired results.

2. Support and participate in professional development. We need to build strength and expertise in ourselves and/or our organizations in FEA, implementation planning, and evaluation. Read, attend seminars, meet with specialists, collect credible cases, and identify mentors who can help you progress in your professional capabilities.

3. Seek out articles and studies that demonstrate the relationship between solid FEA, implementation planning and evaluation, and valued accomplishments. Highlight the salient parts of these publications and circulate them to clients and decisionmakers. Proactively identify performance gaps or potential projects and demonstrate interest to become involved from the start. Gather and disseminate data early in a project’s life. Demonstrate how we can contribute to initial decisionmaking in valued ways. Leverage internal and external cases to show how through early analysis, careful implementation, and systematic evaluation we can make a major difference to the bottom line.

4. Adopt an “account management” approach to clients. Identify opportunities to improve performance by conducting informal FEAs. Demonstrate how past implementation inadequacies decreased results or increased costs. Offer planning methods for avoiding these problems on new projects. Identify efficient, “natural” means for gathering evaluation data and show how this enhances the project’s accomplishments.

5. Emphasize results more than the characteristics of a solution. Speak the language of business. Using FEA, build business cases for our learning and performance solutions. Use process and outcome evaluation methods to strengthen interventions and to show what the investment in learning and performance effort has produced.

In Conclusion

Pamela is only four years old. She is right to invest energy and attention into making puzzles. Her job is one of discovering and learning. Her accomplishment is in putting the pieces together. She is not expected to close gaps or produce more efficient and effective results. After all, she is only four years old and her puzzle building is a form of creative play.

Like Pamela, we must never lose our childlike fascination with creation. However, unlike Pamela, we are learning and performance professionals. Our mission is to produce desired results. We cannot afford the luxury of endlessly building artifacts that will sit on shelves. 🏠



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