

WHAT IT REALLY MEANS TO BE ACCOMPLISHMENT BASED

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Human performance technology (HPT) evolved with the shift from a focus on behavior to accomplishments, the valuable products of behavior. The term *accomplishment* has not always been used consistently over the years, to the detriment of the field. This article summarizes benefits of accomplishment-based performance improvement, reviews Joe Harless's recently republished book, *The Eden Conspiracy*, about accomplishment-based educational reform, and summarizes successful educational reforms that have emerged from *Eden* in nearly 20 years since its original publication.

ONE COULD ARGUE that the evolution of our field from instructional technology to human performance technology (HPT) occurred with the emergence of two key elements: (1) inclusion of *systemic* models of the factors influencing performance, in contrast to instructional technology's focus on skills and knowledge with little regard for other variables, and (2) the shift from behavior to *accomplishments* as the anchor-point for the analysis and description of human performance.

In his often-cited and brilliant diatribe about the "cult of behavior," Thomas F. Gilbert (1978, p. 7) pointed out that the value delivered by human performance is in the *accomplishments* it produces and that the behavior needed for producing those accomplishments is costly, not valuable for its own sake. He characterized the focus on behavior for its own sake as a fundamental error that leaders, managers, performance professionals, and most ordinary people share as the "cult of behavior." Gilbert's description of *worthy* performance, in which the value of accomplishments is greater than the cost of the behavior to produce them, reflects what we currently refer to as *return on investment* (ROI). One can use this formula to describe the ROI in human performance as equal to the value of the accomplishments divided by the cost of behavior for producing those accomplishments. The cost includes

everything needed to acquire and support the people who behave in such a way as to produce the accomplishments.

This evolution from a focus on behavior to anchoring performance in valuable accomplishments represents a paradigm shift in how we think about human performance. As performance improvement professionals, we seek to optimally configure factors in the performance system to produce desired accomplishments with the greatest ROI. As ordinary humans in daily life, we seek to create lives that deliver value to ourselves and others.

Having taught and coached people for several decades while they were conducting performance improvement projects (Binder, 2015), I've come to realize that we humans are more accustomed to observing, talking about, and attempting to influence the activities, or *behavior*, that we and other people exhibit than identifying and describing the valuable products, or *accomplishments*, of that behavior. Unless accomplishments are tangible widgets, deliverables, or other physical products, we may not recognize them. Yet products of behavior such as decisions, relationships, ideas, strategies, and analyses are also accomplishments, but they are not always so easy to see. Once we shift our focus from behavior to accomplishments in the analysis of performance, we open an entirely new approach and perspective that together

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offer greater leverage, simplicity, and power for improving the performance of individuals, teams, processes, whole organizations, or society.

THE LANGUAGE OF ACCOMPLISHMENTS

Gilbert used the term *accomplishment*, which has been adopted by a broad range of HPT and performance improvement professionals. However, despite widespread adoption of that term, there is considerable variation in how people describe accomplishments and what synonyms they use when referring to them. Typical dictionary definitions of *accomplishment* (e.g., those at www.dictionary.com) include descriptions of activity or behavior and of the products of behavior. Some of our colleagues use the words *outcome* and *result* as synonyms for accomplishment. An *outcome*, however, can be a change in behavior, and a *result* can be a cumulative measure of multiple accomplishments calculated as organizational or business results (e.g., increased customer satisfaction). Unfortunately, since these words are open to wide interpretation, it is not always clear how best to describe accomplishments.

Furthermore, the words that we choose make a difference, particularly as we work with others to gain alignment and decide on a path forward. To further complicate communication about accomplishments, many of our colleagues accept passive verb phrases as descriptions of accomplishment (e.g., *maintenance completed*) despite the fact that this phrase describes only the behavior, not the valuable product of that behavior (e.g., *machine ready to go*). It is no wonder that the literature of performance improvement includes a fairly wide range of descriptions accepted as communication about accomplishments.

My colleagues and I (Gilbert et al., 2014) use the phrase *work output* rather than *accomplishment* to refer to the valuable products of behavior, because we find that this term seems to accelerate learning and clear communication about the distinction between behavior and its

valuable products. *Work outputs* implies *countable things*, which is what we teach people to describe when they refer to accomplishments. Our view is that whether the output is at the individual level (e.g., a budget that meets standards) or at the organizational level (e.g., a new market), or at any level in between, we want to focus on *things* that can be counted and evaluated as either meeting criteria for good or not. With this approach, we find it easier to set expectations and agree on definitions of performance.

We discourage the use of words for describing accomplishments that are not *countable* (e.g., *information* or *support*), even though these might seem upon first inspection to describe products of behavior. Because I cannot tell what a *good* piece of information is, I cannot use this description as a unit of analysis. I require a work output that describes *units* of information that can be evaluated one at a time, such as a *data set*, a *report*, an *update*, or an *analysis*. Furthermore, some nouns or noun phrases used to describe accomplishments refer to behavior rather than its valuable products (e.g., a *presentation* or a *phone call*). Each of these examples is a segment of behavior, and to anchor our descriptions of performance in accomplishments, we need to identify the valuable outputs of performing the behavior involved in a presentation (e.g., *business cards in hand*, *applauding audience members*, etc.) or a phone call (e.g., a *sales contract*, an *agreement*, or an *appointment in the calendar*).

Given these possible confusions about the difference between behavior and its valuable products, we need to be quite precise as we teach and practice accomplishment-based performance improvement. If we are going to truly anchor our analyses of and designs for supporting performance in accomplishments, we need to use *countable nouns that describe the valuable products of behavior*. Only then can we easily determine criteria for a good work output to be used for measurement and evaluation, or can we clearly identify the behavior (tasks, tactics, etc.) needed to produce good work outputs. Identifying that behavior is prerequisite for analyzing the factors that support or get in the way of necessary behavior and for configuring optimal combinations of those factors—also called *behavior influences* (Gilbert et al. 2014).

ADVANTAGES OF AN ACCOMPLISHMENT-BASED APPROACH

Gilbert (1978) pointed out the obvious advantage of focusing on accomplishments: that is where the *value* is in performance and what the behavior of people contributes to the success of the team, the organization, or society. Accomplishments are what organizations and society need from its people.

The additional advantages of focusing on accomplishments in the analysis and improvement or management of performance include the following:

- The analysis of performance is often simpler when it is anchored in accomplishments, since there are generally fewer accomplishments than tasks, tactics, or other instances of behavior. Consequently, it is usually more efficient to diagnose and solve problems and to address opportunities to improve performance than to start with detailed descriptions of behavior. Among other things, accomplishments tell us when behavior has been successful.
- Accomplishments liberate behavior, as my colleague Cynthia Riha (personal communication) has often said to leaders and managers. That is, except in situations where precise forms of behavior are essential (e.g., where there is a high risk of accidents or a focus on the quality of products with precise specifications), it is often possible to produce desired accomplishments with a variety of different forms of behavior. This allows leaders and managers to set clear expectations about desired outcomes while encouraging front-line performers to find the most cost-effective ways of producing the same accomplishments. Behavior that is both efficient and produces exceptional levels of accomplishments is known as *exemplary behavior*.
- It is often easier to count (i.e., measure) accomplishments that meet and do not meet specific outcomes than to monitor behavior (Binder, 2009). Counting accomplishments is often more convenient and accessible than monitoring behavior or trying to use lagging measures of organizational/business results to make decisions about performance.
- Explaining how employees' valuable accomplishments contribute to the organization can increase employee engagement, because it draws a direct line of sight from day-to-day behavior through accomplishments to organizational or societal success. People can see more directly how they make a difference than when the focus is on behavior thought to be important but not explicitly linked to valuable accomplishments.

SIMPLIFICATION OF HUMAN PERFORMANCE TECHNOLOGY

My work for at least 35 years has been dedicated to making the language, models, and thought process for performance improvement simpler, more intuitive, and easier to communicate so that everyone in an organization, at

any level in any function, can benefit from the discoveries of behavioral science and performance engineering (Binder, 1995, 1998). One of the major influences on this work, outside of the fields of behavioral science and performance improvement, was Steve Jobs, who strived for simplicity at every level of the organization, its processes, and its product designs (Segall, 2012). In our attempts to simplify and apply plain language to HPT models, we labeled elements in what we call the *performance chain* as organizational/business results, work outputs, behavior, and behavior influences (Binder, 2016). We consider these to be the elements of any human performance, and we teach users to carefully apply language criteria when describing each element. As mentioned previously, we use the phrase *work outputs* to refer to accomplishments, and we define good descriptions of work outputs as countable nouns that describe valuable products of behavior.

The point of such work is to embed the process of analyzing and optimizing performance in a systematic and systemic way into as many different activities and functions as we can, while maintaining in the verbal community the clear distinction between accomplishments and behavior. Through programs for performance consultants, leaders, managers, and coaches we teach a consistent set of plain language terms with two visual models, in addition to applications specific to different types of users. This is one strategy for gaining relatively rapid uptake of what our clients have called *performance thinking*, embodied in our Performance Thinking® programs and tools. We enable viral communication across organizations using our plain English terminology, backed up with programs that enable people to successfully implement and sustain accomplishment-based performance improvement with precision, consistency, and methodological integrity.

WHAT WE'VE LEARNED ABOUT BEING ACCOMPLISHMENT BASED

Over the years, we've discovered a lot about what it truly means to be accomplishment based. Many of our discoveries confirm what another great thought leader, Dr. Joe Harless (Ripley, 1997), contributed to the field about anchoring analysis and design in accomplishments. He created and taught systematic, accomplishment-based methodologies for conducting performance analysis, creating job aids and an accomplishment-based curriculum, ultimately offering many thousands of practitioners his programs: the *Front End Analysis Workshop* (FEA), the *Job Aids Workshop* (JAWS), and the *Accomplishment Based Curriculum Development* (ABCD) program.

Here are a few of what I consider to be key insights about what it means to be accomplishment based:

- When training is designed with accomplishments as objectives rather than behavior or competencies, the training becomes more relevant to both trainees and the organization. It can be more directly integrated with other behavior influences on the job (e.g., expectations, feedback, tools, etc.), the design can be leaner, and it is easier to assess results.
- When business people finally get it about identifying the valuable, countable products of individual, team, group, or process behavior, they become converts, able to partner with performance specialists for continuous performance improvement. They set better goals, understand and manage processes better, and can deconstruct strategies or implementation challenges into specific work outputs as well as the behavior needed to produce them to create execution plans.
- If we're trying to determine ROI for the interventions we design, it's relatively easy to focus the assessment on the value delivered by work outputs and the costs for supporting behavior as elements in the ROI formula.
- I have no doubt, based on personal experience and observation of our field for over 35 years, that interventions designed from beginning to end with a focus on valuable accomplishments are more effective, sustainable, and economical than those with other starting places in the analysis and design process.

THE EDEN CONSPIRACY—AN ACCOMPLISHMENT-BASED APPROACH TO EDUCATIONAL DESIGN

Joe Harless was one of the rock stars of accomplishment-based performance improvement. He participated in the early days of instructional technology, was a major thought leader in the HPT community, and standardized accomplishment-based methodologies for improving performance in organizations. After he retired from business consulting, he wrote a book called *The Eden Conspiracy: Educating for Accomplished Citizenship* (Harless, 2016). The book presented a vision of an educational system and curriculum seamlessly integrated around the accomplishments that people need in order to be successful citizens, including personal and professional accomplishments. He laid out a process built on the ADDIE model (Analysis, Design, Development, Implementation, and Evaluation) pioneered by himself and others, applying it in the early days of instructional technology develop-

ment and continuing through his own ABCD model and methodologies.

His approach to designing an educational system began with a comprehensive examination of the *accomplishments* needed by all stakeholders in a community, including educators, business people, policy makers, parents, students, and local community leadership. In Harless's vision, that process would continue over time as a routine part of any program that came out of it, so that curriculum and instruction could continuously adapt to the changing needs of the community in which the program existed. This would be different for every community based on differences in the accomplishments needed.

While Harless's vision encompassed birth through lifetime education, the first application of his approach came while he was formulating and completing the book with a request from leaders in Coweta County, Georgia, to help address issues that local businesses were raising about the failure of the educational system to prepare students for increasingly sophisticated high-paying jobs. The education system was simply not keeping up with the needs.

Harless assembled roughly 200 people from all categories of stakeholders to determine the needs of the community and to design a seamless program to address them. From this work came the Central Educational Center (CEC) in Newnan, Georgia, Harless's hometown. With support from businesses and from both sides of the political aisle within the state, and with funding from the Gates Foundation, the county built a hybrid program that combined high school with technical college in a joint venture with local businesses. The program still exists today almost 20 years later; it has been replicated in more than 35 counties across Georgia and is in various stages of replication in other states, as well as in India, Africa, and other countries. Most recently, in the fall of 2016, the CEC worked with a German company to develop the first certified German Apprenticeship program in the United States, offering credentials accepted worldwide.

The Cambridge Center for Behavioral Studies is republishing *The Eden Conspiracy* (www.behavior.org). I had the honor of writing both an introduction to the new edition connecting behavioral science to Harless's accomplishment-based approach and an epilogue summarizing what has occurred since the book was published, pointing to additional resources, including online videos and books about the evolution and current state of the CEC and its many replicants. What is profound about these programs is that they have shown themselves to be sustainable, because they are anchored to the accomplishments needed by the local community. The programs have led companies to invest in their communities. The programs have also enabled graduates to obtain employment

paying twice the national average, to be accepted to colleges, and to obtain professional certifications in fields such as welding, dental assisting, film and video production, and robotics.

In preparation for writing the book's introduction and epilogue, I visited the CEC, spending time with its students, faculty, and leadership. I also met with the lieutenant governor of Georgia, Casey Cagle, who has been a strong supporter from the beginning when he was in the state legislature (Cagle, 2016). My observations provided me with a much greater appreciation than before of what it really means to be accomplishment based. Let me describe just a few of my observations.

- I observed, and was filmed in, a TV studio located at the school building that is an extension of a local TV station. The studio manager and instructor is a film and video producer who had been in the business for decades. The studio produces one TV show per week, with all roles filled by students. It also produces many other short videos for the Internet and other purposes. These young people, some as young as 14 or 15, were professional, competent, attentive, and utterly engaged. Several of them had won regional or national awards for their productions.
- I interviewed students who were currently learning and working in fields such as dental assisting, cancer treatment, robotics, TV production (both behind and in front of the camera), and hospitality. They were excited and bright-eyed, with clear sense of purpose; quite the opposite of the bored, cynical students I have seen so often in high schools. They were focused on accomplishments! One student, currently becoming certified as a dental assistant, possibly on the way to dental school, said, "At my high school I felt like a kid. At this program, I feel like myself. This is what I want to be." Others told me how they had completed internships in large companies and were surprised by how many employees older than themselves lacked appropriate dress, vocabulary, and etiquette for successful professional employment, things they had learned under the category of *work ethic* in the CEC programs. These students were prepared for their lives, and they knew it.
- Perhaps the most important aspect of Harless's approach is that it offers an alternative to top-down educational reform in a bottom-up educational design process based on the needs (required accomplishments) for all key stakeholders in the community. Unlike so many top-down educational reform efforts, this one will sustain, because it continuously

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adapts to the needs of its community rather than imposing a top-down methodology driven by policy makers, educational leaders, academics, or others. It was deeply rooted in the accomplishments needed in that community, as are the more than 35 replications across Georgia and elsewhere. This became obvious when I attended a boisterous local barbecue that brought together several hundred community leaders, business people, and influential citizens. Virtually everyone with whom I spoke knew about the CEC; had participated in the analysis, design, or governance of the CEC in some way; and was proud of how it had helped to boost their local economy and enable their students to excel.

These are just a few aspects of what it really means to be accomplishment based. Seeing the ramifications of an accomplishment-based approach integrated with deep stakeholder analysis and engagement in a community allows one to fully comprehend the value of focusing on accomplishments in all areas of life and in all aspects of human development.

I encourage you to read Joe's book (Harless, 2016), and perhaps to introduce it to educators, policy makers, or business leaders in your community. This model can be replicated anywhere, and it might certainly benefit from the accomplishment-based performance improvement professionals available who can help guide the process in each community. Indeed, this might provide an entrepreneurial opportunity for HPT professionals seeking to make a difference in education. Moreover, this model offers a vehicle for taking the many innovations that have come from instructional design and behavioral science

more deeply into schools, to support the accomplishments those schools are designed to produce in and for their students and their communities. It also gives communities and their educational systems a way to connect the learning and performance of their developing young citizens all the way up to the Mega (Kaufman, 2009) via the accomplishments needed for citizens of a successful society to develop and thrive. 🌅

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