



# Performance Support Matures

by Gary J. Dickelman

Welcome to the fourth special issue of *Performance Improvement (PI)* for which I have served as guest editor. The topic, of course, is performance support, and this issue includes a set of articles that underscores the maturing of the practice. This manifests itself not in the usual suspects gaining more experience, but in new faces applying the principles of performance support from new perspectives and to exciting new applications.

What's new? *Internationalization*: the shrinking of the world with the proliferation of the Internet, where thoughts and techniques must turn to deeper insights of context. Sonia Arias kicks off this issue with her thoughts on performance-centered design for developing countries. Sonia is someone who has *been there and done that*. She begins her article by referencing the fine work of past special issues of *PI*, notably "Around the World in 80 Clicks" by Duane Degler and Lisa Battle (2001). Sonia embraces and expands on their ideas based on real-world experience and a keen, fresh interest in performance support for developing countries.

Maturing means that intellectual excitement must yield to financial realities. Hasan Altalib surveyed the best and brightest in terms of *return on investment (ROI)*. We have all heard the war stories about implementing performance-centered systems. Are they worth the trouble? You bet, and Hasan provides us with a myriad of tools and techniques for measuring ROI. "ROI cannot be complete until the results are converted to dollars..." says the article. Hasan's collection of heuristics, metrics, approaches, and spreadsheets, from tree-tops to net present values, gives us the tools to

make the case and get on with the performance support agenda.

Performance support means *business* for Staples.com and manifests itself in a mature user-centered design practice that supports the e-business portion of its \$11 billion in annual revenue. Tom McCann and Colin Hynes, senior usability professionals at Staples, present two usability case studies, where the activities have helped Staples.com achieve its continuing contributions to company revenue. From site registration to check-out, these experts reveal their processes and insights into how performance-centered usability evaluation is critical to the success of e-business. Lessons learned are transferable to a myriad of web-based environments.

Another sign of maturing is when disciplines outside the mainstream of performance support become aware of its ideas and apply them to their domains. *Tips and Tricks* magazine Senior Editor Ara Shirinian returns to *PI*, with Red Prairie software project leader Erik Dickelman, to further explore how to apply video game interaction design to business performance. Erik and Ara represent two sides of the product development coin: enterprise system logistics *tools* and *games*. At a glance, these worlds have nothing in common...until Erik and Ara point out that the human being is a common element of both systems. The rubrics of success for video games, which reflect a plethora of human factors common to enterprise tools, are indeed transferable to the world of enterprise systems. Erik and Ara provide unique and powerful insights from their respective worlds, including the *outside-in* approach to design and fundamentals of human motivation in virtual worlds.

A further sign of maturing is the extent to which the technical world and human-centered world intersect and embrace one another rather than collide. Dave Schubert explores the exciting world of rich media types, including the MPEG-4 protocol, and explains how such emerging standards provide opportunities to move beyond *bolt-on* static media types to intrinsic, embedded rich media performance support. Dave appeals to our need as performance support developers to gain deeper understanding of the enabling technologies and to make them matter-of-fact parts of our design and development arsenals.

The issue concludes with Cathy Brown bringing us up to date on the gamut of performance-centered usability techniques. Formative methods grounded in the principles of traditional usability evaluation are critical for performance technologists, instructional designers, software developers, and human factors engineers, particularly in the world of the Internet. Cathy reminds us of why we test, what to test, alternative methods of testing, and generally what the best usability practices and resources today are. Her article is a minicompendium of all things usable.

I am once again excited to be a part of this great *PI* series on performance support, and pleased to contribute to the maturing process. Our authors for this issue are bright, young, energetic, and excited about performance support. They are armed with, and will help arm us with, tools and techniques that break down the barriers and remove past frustrations associated with implementing performance-centered systems. In 1990 we spoke of exciting new principles, built many prototypes that never saw the light of production, and discovered the many barriers that needed removing. The brash cockiness of our 2002

practitioners gets right to the point: internationalization, ROI, e-business, outside-in software development, rich media types, and usability. Enjoy this insightful edition of *PI*! 🎧

### Related Reading

Degler, D. & Battle, L. (2001). Around the world in 80 clicks. *Performance Improvement*, 40(7), 32-40.



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