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In Search of Measuring Workplace Productivity

Presented at the ProWork Seminar May 2008, Helsinki, Finland

By: Joe Ouye, Ph.D.

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Most agree that measuring the impacts on productivity of workplace changes is important and necessary, but surprisingly few tackle it seriously. The majority of studies on the productivity of distributed teams, for example, relied on anecdotal evidence or self-reporting rather than rigorously measuring performance. This is a real problem for those interested in changing ways of working to improve organizational performance. If you can't measure it, how do we know that our interventions make any difference? This paper reviews the difficulties and approaches of measuring knowledge worker productivity, and suggests a Workplace Performance Model, based on principles from Human Performance Technology (HPT), for understanding and designing multiple measuring approaches.

The difficulties start with the elusive nature of knowledge work, described by one researcher as "intangible, ill-defined and unaccountable," but they are further confounded by the confusion wrought by different definitions and a multitude of possible approaches. The traditional economic definition of productivity as simply "The relationship between what is put into a piece of work and what is yielded" has led to the long lasting frustration known as the "Productivity Paradox," where there was no apparent improvement in productivity despite the billions of dollars spend on technological improvements. Economists are getting beyond this as they realize that productivity benefits are mostly intangibles, such as management quality, work processes, and the ability to make these changes in complementary and reinforcing ways. The Human Performance Technology (HPT) — the study and ethical practices of improving productivity in organizations by design, and developing effective — interventions that are results-oriented, comprehensive and systemic— expands the Input/Output productivity model to encompass the context and processes that translate

the inputs into outputs, emphasizing tangible and measurable outcomes. This is a much more useful way to approach workplace productivity for the interventionist.

Based on the HPT approach, the paper describes a Workplace Performance Model that incorporates the many approaches to measurement, including measuring context changes (e.g., user satisfaction), process changes (e.g., work practices and behaviors), and outputs (quality, schedule and budget). There is no one best way to measure workplace productivity; each has its advantages and disadvantages and much depends on the specific organizational problem being addressed. In most cases, a Family of Measurements — the use of multiple measurement approaches — is best. Most organizations are multi-dimensional with differing perspectives, goals, objectives, expertise and interests that can't be captured with a single type of measurement. A Family of Measurements, causally linked, go even further in helping understand the chain of interventions, their effects and outcomes.