What is ISPI’s Value Proposition: Looking Back and Forward

by Guy W. Wallace and Geary A. Rummler

Twenty years ago Geary Rummler proposed in this journal that our Society’s driving force be “technologies.” His article, “Technology Domains and NSPI” (P&I Journal/October 1983), resonated with me then as it still does today.

As a recent International Society for Performance Improvement (ISPI) Board member and President-elect, I am focusing my ISPI energies in two key areas, and one has to do with the marketing of ISPI’s Value Proposition.

After 22 years of membership, I can say that I have learned a tremendous amount at the Society’s table. But one thing that hasn’t been clear to me since the first day is what HPT really includes. What’s inside our box, and what’s outside? I understand the “I” from the older versions of our name is a subset of the “P” but what exactly are the other, non-instructional components of performance?

There are many professional societies and affiliations in the big-tent marketplace of “improvement.” There are many sources for information and development. There are many conferences. There are many newsletters and journals and magazines and websites. We at ISPI are in competition with them all.

Given that, how do we help ISPI prospects make an informed decision on where to spend their time, attention, and money? I believe it’s through marketing (informing and communicating) our value proposition. “Come to ISPI and learn X, Y, and Z!” our literature should proclaim!

But besides performance-based instruction (more than 85% of our members are in the instruction business), what else can we emphatically proclaim we have of value? What else affects human performance? And, as Danny Langdon has been promoting, should we limit ourselves to “human” performance?

Does the ISPI Value Proposition include becoming aware, knowledgeable and/or skilled at concepts, models, methods, tools, and techniques that improve “performance” from fields/disciplines such as—

- quality
- finance
- organizational development
- ergonomics
- marketing
- industrial psychology
- management sciences

If our Value Proposition included concepts, models, methods, tools, and techniques from these fields, then we could begin to assemble content products/services based on these and help our members become aware of, knowledgeable about, and/or skilled in their application. If not, we can focus on those concepts, models, methods, tools, and techniques that improve performance within our “box.”

We can expand or narrow our box as we as a Society see fit. But to entice others into our fold, given all the competition, we had better be pretty darn clear with members and prospects what we stand for and what we can help them learn and master. Otherwise, we can only proclaim, “Come to ISPI and learn about performance-based instruction and some other worthy non-instructional stuff!” Hardly compelling.

And compelling is what we need in these trying economic times to retain existing members and pull in new members. ISPI’s Value Proposition must be compelling for us to both survive and thrive!

Let’s begin a societywide dialogue about ISPI and human performance technology. What is human performance technology? And should it be marketed as human performance technology or as performance technology? (To paraphrase Danny Langdon, let’s “Get the ‘H’ out!”)

—Guy W. Wallace
As they say, “timing is everything.” Last night I returned from the 2002 ISPI Conference where I heard comments such as “ISPI has an identity crisis” and “we can’t do anything until we identify what HPT is.” This morning, I re-read my October 1983 article “Technology Domains and NSPI,” which follows. And I think I see a way out of (or around) the “definition” quagmire. I am curious to see if you agree with me. Let me suggest you give the article a quick read and then consider the following argument.

First, don’t confuse ISPI (a loose association of individuals concerned, in some form or other, with changing behavior) with a “field” or discipline such as HPT (whatever that is). ISPI has historically seemed to feel that it either was the “field” or represented the “field.” With that mind-set, it was always necessary to define that field. That has never been accomplished (nor will it ever be) because to do so would automatically define some ISPI luminaries as being in the field (and ISPI) and others out of the field. This article reminds me that we don’t even have to go there. There is a way around the definition issue.

The article suggests that ISPI need do only two relatively straightforward things to avoid “definition” and resolve any identity crisis:

1. Agree on an objective such as “Improved performance/effectiveness of individuals.” (This is merely an example of an objective used in the 1983 paper—nor necessarily the objective I would argue for today, particularly since it does not address either the Process or Organization Levels of performance. As you read this paper, please don’t quibble with the examples, but focus on the notion of a “technologies framework.”

2. Identify those “technologies” that make a contribution to the objective. And then say that ISPI embraces all those technologies and technologists who contribute to our objective.

As you will see from the article, there are a lot of logistical benefits of this “technologies” approach, including how to organize conferences and publications. In addition, I think there are two other advantages to the ISPI organization and image:

1. The “value-add” of ISPI becomes that of an organization that promotes the integration of those technologies committed to “improved performance/effectiveness of individuals” (or whatever the objective becomes). This stance would make it very clear that ISPI stands for holistic analysis and comprehensive solutions/applications to improve performance. No other professional organization does such a thing.

2. The approach is “inclusive” versus “exclusive.” The thrust is to include any technology that has demonstrated it can help achieve our objective of “improved….” This will necessarily require establishing criteria for what is a “technology” and an “emerging technology”—something that clearly differentiates between “snake oil” and a change practice or methodology. But developing such criteria should be a piece of cake compared to defining HPT.

As I said earlier, read the article and see what you think.

—Geary A. Rummler
III. Changes in the work/performance environment (changes in the environment components of the human performance system such as clarification of expectations, consequences, feedback, stimulus clarification, and resources).

NSPI’s general domain would be these three major types of interventions.

There are a number of ways the change process can be depicted, but for sake of argument, I suggest we look at it as having the basic steps shown in Figure 2. This process holds, regardless of the particular intervention or combination of interventions one might make to effect performance.

If NSPI is concerned with three basic interventions (Figure 1) and if it acknowledges a universal change process (Figure 2), then it is possible to identify some technologies or technology domains relevant to the stated objective of improved performance/effectiveness of individuals. And further, it is possible to show the relevance of each technology domain, which is made up of sub-components such as job/task analysis, behavioral analysis, and so on. (I want to stress that I’m not proposing that
Figure 3. Change Process, Related (Possible) Performance/Instruction Technology Domains, and Relevant Research Areas.
the four technology domains shown here—needs analysis, instructional design and development, performance engineering, and evaluation—are the technology domains for NSPI; only that such domains and their sub-components could be identified by NSPI.)

Once the technology domains are identified, it would then be possible to identify subjects or research areas relevant (or potentially relevant) to the technology domains.

For example, "left brain-right brain" research is a potentially important input to learning theory and learner physiology, which in turn are important to various components of the instructional design and development technology domain, which is utilized to change the repertoire of the individual.

Figure 3 is the essence of my proposal—a framework for showing the relevance and relationships of possible tech-
Technologies, subject matter, and research topics. The remaining figures represent possible applications of the framework.

Figure 4 is a different configuration of the content of Figure 3, illustrating the relationship of research areas, technology domains, and performance variables to the proposed NSPI objective, the improved performance/effectiveness of individuals.

The matrix in Figure 5 represents a possible way to relate technologies to subject matter or research areas. For example, research in learning theory, behavior modification, and organization behavior (to name only a few) is relevant to organization performance analysis. And learning theory is relevant to organization performance analysis, instructional systems design, material design and development, and so on.

This matrix is a possible way to organize and describe the NSPI conference program. Topics are classified by track (again, these tracks are illustrative, although I was hard-pressed to come up with any more), and their relationship to each technology domain is made explicit. Such a matrix would be beneficial to program designers, presenters, and conference attendees—particularly newcomers.

I have reviewed these thoughts and diagrams with several people who concur that there are these potential applications of the proposed framework:

1. As the basis to define what NSPI is and is not and possibly to conclude that NSPI's driving force is to be technologies (as I proposed in my conference presentation).
2. If a technology focus is the decision of the NSPI leadership, then a framework such as this could help in defining the technology domains over which there might be chairpersons who serve several-year terms.
3. As a conceptual map of the field for:
   a. newcomers
   b. practitioners
   c. managers of training who have come to their responsibilities with no idea of the disciplines/technologies they are supposed to manage
4. As a basis for organizing the conference programs and journal content and communicating the relationship of said programs and content to the populations mentioned above.

Please email your comments to James Pershing, pershin@indiana.edu, for inclusion in the Readers’ Forum in an upcoming issue of Performance Improvement.