

# WHAT IS HUMAN PERFORMANCE TECHNOLOGY?

Written for ISPI-Vancouver By Guest Tony O'Driscoll, EdD

In the most concise form possible, human performance technology (HPT) can be defined as "systems thinking applied to human resource activities" (Rosenberg, 1996, p. 373). To truly comprehend and internalize the meaning of this definition, however, further analysis is required.

Perhaps the most effective way to characterize HPT is to define each word of the term separately. The word human emphasizes the fact that HPT is a discipline that focuses on human performers in organizational work settings. Performance denotes the achievement of outputs of the work setting that are of value to the stakeholder who requested the work. The word technology, in this context, refers to the application of procedures derived from scientific research and practical experience to solve problems (Stolovitch & Keeps, 1992).

Harold Stolovitch and Erica Keeps integrate these three independent components of HPT in the following definition:

[HPT is] the application of what is known about human and organizational behavior to enhance accomplishments, economically and effectively, in ways that are valued within the work setting. Thus HPT is a field of endeavor that seeks to bring about changes to a system, in such a way that the system is improved in terms of the achievement it values (1992, p. 4).

There are as many HPT definitions as there are authors who are part of the HPT discourse community. While no single definition has emerged to appease everyone within this community, consensus about the critical attributes of HPT appears to have been reached:

- HPT is systematic.
- HPT is systemic.
- HPT is grounded in scientifically derived theories and the best empirical evidence available.
- HPT is open to all means, methods, and media.
- HPT is focused on achievements that human performers and the system value.
- (Stolovitch & Keeps, 1992)

## References

Rosenberg, M. (1996). Human performance technology. In R. Craig (Ed.), *The ASTD Training and Development Handbook* (pp. 370-393). New York: McGraw Hill.

Stolovitch, H., & Keeps, E. (1992). *Handbook of Human Performance Technology*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass/Pfeiffer.

## Acknowledgment

The above introduction to HPT is an excerpt from "Chronicling the Emergence of Human Performance Technology," by Tony O'Driscoll, EdD. It was published by the International Society for Performance Improvement in the July 2003 issue of *Performance Improvement*. It is reproduced here courtesy of the author.

Dr. Tony O'Driscoll is a Learning Strategist with IBM's Centre for Advanced Learning and an active ISPI member. Dr. O'Driscoll's speaking engagements and his most recently published book: *Achieving Desired Business Performance*, emphasize the critical need for corporations to leverage their organization and information technology infrastructures to better harnesses the key asset in the information age economy: Human Capital.