I believe performance is at the heart of our work as information architects—helping humans do what they want or need to.

Perhaps performance is an awkward word choice. You might typically think of computer performance rather than human performance. If you find the term confusing, envision performance as “outcomes” or “accomplishment.” I’ve found this equation valuable: “Capacity minus interference equals performance.” This equation states that we can accomplish more when we reduce interference.

Among those who attend to human performance is David Sless, an Australian information design theorist and practitioner. David runs the Communication Research Institute (http://communication.org.au), which helps industry and government improve the quality of their communication with people. In his work, David explores...
what happens in the space *between* people and information. His research emphasizes what people do with information and the way they use it to construct meanings appropriate for actions. His findings quite clearly show that the design of information can improve efficiency and productivity.

**So What?**

I've always been interested in how we can improve the ability for people and organizations to perform better. As someone who often feels thwarted by reading burdensome (often academic) sentences, I began my lifelong quest to make the complex clear. Along the way, I discovered Thomas Gilbert’s *Engineering Human Performance*, a foundational text for those of us who love accomplishment. Predictably, the book hurt my brain (Gilbert wrote in a traditional engineering style). So instead of reading it, I carried it around a lot. Despite the challenges, I managed to find a quote that stuck with me: “We can improve human performance as much as 600 percent by improving the structure of information.”

I believe it. Improving performance makes good business sense. Improving information structure improves performance. I believe we all have an opportunity to look more closely at the possibilities.

**Measure**

At the heart of performance thinking is benchmarking – the research and testing done before a redesign that provides the basis for comparison following the redesign. Benchmarking helps us determine whether changes in information structure enable humans to accomplish what they want to. Benchmarking helps us understand the consequences of good or flawed performance.

How do we use benchmarks to help humans? Consider the following, which we can measure only by establishing benchmarks:

- Decreases in
  - time to understand (through contrasting, comparing, differentiating)
  - time to complete a transaction or work process
  - implementation costs (for a system, product, new process, etc.)
  - hand-offs of work, calls or problems to others
  - transaction costs
  - complaints and other measures of dissatisfaction (abandoned processes, reduced sales, etc.)

And increases in

- ability to see consequences of actions
- satisfaction with an organization and its representatives and products, services or information as measured by surveys, follow-up calls or complaint activity

As information architects, we have the opportunity to learn when our constituents are thwarted by information structure. If possible, we should observe actual performers doing actual work in actual work contexts. We should understand what performers need to know, what is better referenced and what is best supported. We should understand the pressures, activities, accountabilities, interruptions, relationships and consequences of good and flawed performance. And we *should* measure.

Attending to performance makes good business sense. It also can be personally satisfying. We serve as gatekeepers, developing an environment to help humans perform.