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Health and Trust: Trusting people's needs

March 22, 2016 / in [By Katherine Sanders](#), [Language](#), [News](#), [Productivity](#), [Resources](#), [Stress](#), [Trust](#) / by [Katherine Sanders](#)

As an engineer, I'm surprised how often I hear the language of manufacturing and machine productivity used to describe people's performance. I once worked at a consulting firm where each person was

evaluated by his or her “utilization rate,” (“UT”).

UT is a measure of productivity originating in manufacturing. It’s the ratio of the number of hours a machine is running compared to the total number of possible hours. At some point someone decided it should be used to describe how *people* contribute to an organization.

I find it troubling to describe human performance in manufacturing terms for a host of reasons, but fundamentally because **people are not machines**. Why do we try to treat them as such?

For example, to calculate our UT, the firm compared our billable hours (revenue generation) to the number of work hours in a day/week/month. This ratio was used to determine if we received disciplinary action, were to be fired or deserved a bonus or promotion. UTs were communicated across the organization. Those with high UTs were considered the most valuable employees. And as your UT descended, you experienced descending levels of influence.

Is that an effective way to describe employee value?

UTs don’t, for example, take into consideration other vital ways people affect group performance. Are we helping others? Collaborating and sharing? Are we creating new markets? Innovating? Are we good supervisors? Caring? Are we recruiting new talent? Mentoring? Do our clients enjoy working with us?

To make matters worse, because this firm was uninterested in mentoring lower-UT-scoring employees, turnover was constant. If you couldn’t figure out how to generate and sustain a high UT quickly, you weren’t there very long. Those who remained worked with a changing sea of faces. Morale was chronically low.

Applying manufacturing measures to people’s performance fails because it can’t take into account the ways that people’s needs and contributions are distinct from those of machines. To expect people to perform as machines is an assumption that is flawed at every level.



I'm going to place part of the blame on my own field, industrial engineering.

Take a look at this [description of how to calculate machine cycle time](#)

<http://www.mmsonline.com/columns/a-realistic-definition-of-cycle-time>.

There is no commentary on what the machine operator needs, only instruction to build in time for the machine's needs. In fact, in the article's closing sentences, the authors suggest, "machine cleaning and warm-ups can be done while the machine is normally out of production, such as during lunch, breaks or off-shifts." In essence, the authors recommend machines be serviced during time set aside for people to rest and rejuvenate. Maybe the service folks are on a different schedule. Maybe not. It's not worth mentioning.

This is how we are taught.

Engineers design and communicate specifications for how the machines they create will best function. We communicate those design specs clearly (ideal climate, type of fuel, duration of performance, maintenance schedule) so they can be followed carefully. We know that machines can only function when we take care of them.

Yet we omit the people operating and maintaining these machines from our specs entirely, as if they don't matter. Someone else will figure that part out. (Turns out, no one else usually figures that out.)

We act as if people are cogs in a large, organizational machine that can be switched on and off, in and out, at will. Fixed after they break down. Refueled annually with a two-week vacation. Sustained by a 30-minute lunch break.

You might say, "Well, it's easier to predict what machines need than what people need," or "People are adaptable, they can take care of themselves!"

And you're right, in part. People *are* more varied and adaptable, at least for short periods of time.



But we actually do know what people need to be healthy and to do their best work.

Here's a short list, taken from decades of scholarship and research on the subject:

- Appreciation
- Autonomy
- Progress towards meaningful goals

- Reasonable workload
- Purpose
- Growth
- Social support
- Movement
- Sunlight
- Rest and restoration
- And, yes, of course: **adequate financial resources**
[\[http://content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0.9171.2019628.00.html\]](http://content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0.9171.2019628.00.html) so that they're not stressed about money.

We have to trust people's needs. Design for these needs. Respond to these needs.

When organizations ignore people's needs, they risk becoming unhealthy work systems.

Unhealthy work systems have some combination of high turnover, high absenteeism, high presenteeism (showing up to work while sick and under-performing), low morale, poor quality, high incident rates of accidents or near-misses, safety violations, grievance procedures and lawsuits. They might achieve a high level of through-put, but it comes at a cost.

The epidemic of stress-related diseases and professional burnout in the US population speaks to this fact.

We act as if these costs don't affect the bottom line. But they do. Every day.

What if, instead, we cared for our people as meticulously as we care for our machines? If you and your colleagues came with a set of specifications, what would they be?

Be Healthy: Designing Rejuvenation into Work (April 1 & 29) [http://beeffectiveseries.com/the-series/]
will help you envision a healthier working life for yourself. One that feels better. One where you can contribute your best work – sustainably.

-Katherine Sanders, PhD [<http://beeffectiveseries.com/about-us/>]



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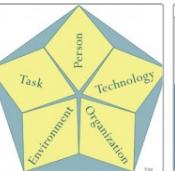
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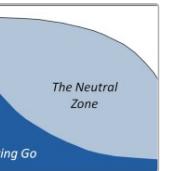
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