

# Writing Good Work Objectives

Derivation & Specification

Fred Nickols



2016

# WRITING GOOD WORK OBJECTIVES

## IT ISN'T EASY BUT IT IS MANAGEABLE

Writing good work objectives is not easy. This is true whether you are writing them for yourself or for someone else. Getting at meaningful content for a work objective requires you to think at length and in depth about the work to be performed. It is unlikely that you will be able to sit down and dash off a set of finished work objectives. Instead, you will have to write them, think them over, rewrite them, then rewrite them again. (Frankly, if you find writing good work objectives an easy task, chances are you know something the rest of us don't and would you please share it?)

Although writing good work objectives is not easy, it is a manageable task. The purposes of this paper are to examine the qualities and characteristics of good work objectives and to make the task of writing them easier. Because the form or specification of a work objective is more easily dealt with than its content or derivation, we will tackle the form or structure of a work objective first.

## THE FORM OF AN OBJECTIVE

"Form ever follows function."<sup>1</sup> The function served by a work objective is to clearly communicate (a) the result sought from the work to be performed and (b) guidelines for determining if its achievement is satisfactory. It follows that the form of a well-written work objective should contain at least two components: a verb-object component specifying what is to be accomplished, and a standards component indicating acceptable performance.<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup>There are two reasons for this note. First, the quotation often appears as "form follows function," which is incorrect because it is incomplete. The correct phrasing is "Form ever follows function." Second, the quotation is often attributed to psychiatrist Harry Stack Sullivan (1892-1949) when, in fact, it owes to architect Henri Louis Sullivan (1859-1924).

<sup>2</sup> The characteristics above are common to learning objectives and to work objectives. For the most popular treatment of learning objectives, see Robert F. Mager's *Preparing Instructional Objectives*. For the first treatment of work objectives, see "Management by Objectives and Self Control," Chapter 11 in Peter Drucker's *The Practice of Management* (pp.121-136). See also George Odiorne's later work, *Management by Objectives*.

# WRITING GOOD WORK OBJECTIVES

On occasion, work is to be accomplished under such unusual circumstances that these, too, are spelled out in the objective. When this is the case, the work objective contains a conditions component. A conditions component is optional. The verb-object and the standards components are more or less mandatory. Without them, the objective isn't an objective at all.

## SOME EXAMPLES

Here is an example of a work objective:

- Increase the amount of revenue from new sources by not less than \$10 million per year for each of the next five fiscal years.

Clearly, this is a work objective for someone with very broad responsibility, perhaps a vice president of sales or marketing.

Let us narrow our focus a bit, say to the scope of work of someone managing a testing program at Educational Testing Service, which is where I was employed when I first wrote this paper. Here is another example:

- Return a program net of not less than 12.5% of expenses in FY 1999-2000.

This is still a pretty broad work objective. Most of us are not responsible for anything this grand. Let us narrow our focus even more, to a possible objective for someone working in a document processing area.

Open letter mail at an average hourly rate of at least 375 pieces per hour, while observing all machine safety precautions and without damage to the contents of any more than one piece per thousand.

There are people who would spend a lot of time and energy arguing that the phrase "while obeying all safety precautions" is a condition. There are others who would argue that it is a standard. What is the point of such an argument? *Absolutely nothing*. The objective of a work objective is the clear communication of expected performance. There is little value to be gained from identifying and classifying the components of a given work objective. Do not waste time trying to identify the components of a work objective. And do not waste time trying to construct conditions components if they are not immediately apparent to you.

# WRITING GOOD WORK OBJECTIVES

All three of the preceding objectives are clear, measurable, and time-tied. These are qualities to strive for in work objectives. The three objectives just presented also offer up three additional observations about work objectives. They can be very broad or very narrow in scope, they can address financial or operational matters, and they can address situational or recurring work requirements.

Following are some more sample work objectives. Look them over and then we will review and comment on them.

- ✓ Identify and map at least four major work processes within XYZ division. All process maps must reflect the initiating inputs and their sources, the transformation routines and their resource requirements, and the terminating outputs and their destinations. All maps must use standard data, flowchart, and process symbols, and be accompanied by text narratives. Volume data are required for inputs and outputs, and throughput rates are required for all transformation routines. One process will be completely identified and mapped in each quarter of the coming fiscal year. All four will be complete by the end of the fiscal year.
- ✓ Design, develop, and implement a system for tracking payments (checks and money orders) that are held for more than a single business day. This system is to be operational by January 15 of the coming year and, by the 15<sup>th</sup> of the following month should contain one month's data. For a given payment, the tracking system should be able to indicate its date of receipt, its dollar amount, and its date of deposit.
- ✓ By the end of the first reporting period, and by the end of each reporting period thereafter, identify at least two work process improvements having quantifiable operational or financial benefits.
- ✓ Within the next six months, reduce the reject rate for registration forms in Program ABC from its present level of six per cent to a maximum of three per cent.

As you can see from the last example, work objectives can be short and sweet. As you can see from the first two, that is not always the case. Remember, the objective is clarity, which does not necessarily mean brevity.

# WRITING GOOD WORK OBJECTIVES

None of the objectives above sprang forth in finished form. All required thinking and several required extensive rewriting. As written, they are acceptable, but they might still benefit from some careful editing. The third and fourth objectives, for example, place the time-tied portion of the standards component at the beginning of the objective. This serves a useful purpose: it focuses attention on the deadline. Alternate wording for objective three might be as follows:

- ✓ Identify at least two work process improvements having quantifiable operational or financial benefits during each of the upcoming reporting periods.

Here is a work objective that is truly short and sweet:

- ✓ Launch four new testing programs in the coming fiscal year.

Clear? I think so. Measurable? Sure is. Time-tied? Obviously. Could it be improved? You bet. One could stipulate a condition such as a cost limitation; for example, "at a total cost not to exceed \$20 million." One could also stipulate markets; for example, "with one program targeted at each of the following markets: the home, K-12, school to work, and work to school." But, even the stripped-down version satisfies the two basic criteria for a work objective; there is a verb-object component, and some indication regarding how to tell if the objective has been met.

There are three more points to be covered in this paper. One is the distinction between action and results. A second has to do with who actually writes the objectives. The third deals with derivation, that is, the source of the objectives. Let's tackle the derivation issue next.

## DERIVATION OF OBJECTIVES: WHERE DO YOU GET THEM?

Objectives are derived from a process of reflection and analysis. Some of the more common areas or aspects of the workplace where reflection and analysis will yield objectives include problems, processes, practices and people.

### PROBLEMS (OR, IF YOU PREFER, "OPPORTUNITIES")

Although many people prefer to label discrepancies in results as "opportunities" instead of "problems," the facts are that the work-

# WRITING GOOD WORK OBJECTIVES

place is full of such discrepancies, no matter how we choose to label them.

Discrepancies in results offer fruitful ground for the derivation and subsequent specification of objectives. At one company, for example, the quality of business intelligence was deemed totally inadequate. Why? Well, for one reason, there was no systematic effort to gather, compile and disseminate it. In short, there was no discernible business intelligence function. Guess what? A senior manager found himself with the objective of establishing a viable business intelligence function.

## PROCESSES

Work processes also offer fruitful ground for deriving work objectives. This is particularly true regarding any kind of ongoing or continuous improvement effort. Consider the manager of a fairly sizable call center. Each year her objectives include one or more objectives related to achieving specific, measurable improvements in some aspect of call center performance.

## PRACTICES

Practices, also known as methods and procedures, offer a third area where reflection and analysis can produce meaningful work objectives. These might qualify as incremental improvements, work simplification or even that dreaded word, "reengineering." A simple example will illustrate the kind of payoff that can be found here. A manager whose unit periodically distributes printed materials to hundreds of sites throughout the continental United States (and overseas as well), was charged with reducing the costs of providing these materials. It turns out the materials were regularly reprinted and redistributed in their entirety owing to the way they were bound. A simple shift to loose-leaf binders enabled the printing and distribution of only the changed pages, greatly reducing cost and waste.

## PEOPLE

People, too, can be a source of objectives. For one thing, their developmental needs and requirements provide one source of objectives. For another, they can generate objectives related to other matters. In other words, people can set their own objectives. This brings us to the next issue: Who writes them?

# WRITING GOOD WORK OBJECTIVES

## WHO ACTUALLY WRITES THEM?

This question can be restated as “Do we solicit work objectives or do we impose them?” In this enlightened new age of empowerment, full of self-managed teams and even a self-directing individual or two, many managers and supervisors find themselves on the horns of a dilemma; should they specify work objectives for the people whose performance they must review, or should they solicit objectives from them?

There is no easy answer to this question, but it is safe to say that the choice is greatly influenced by the kind of work involved.

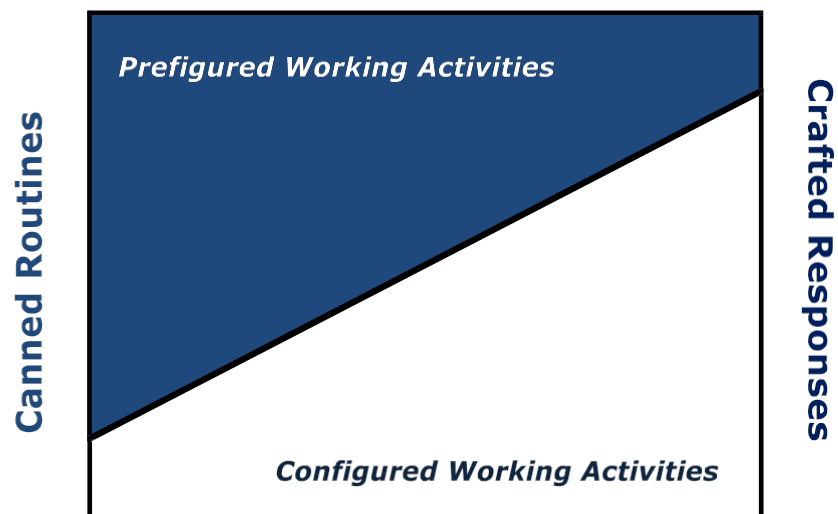


Figure 1 – The Mix of Work

Figure 1 illustrates a fact easily confirmed by a moment's reflection: the job of any given employee is a mix of routine and non-routine activities. This means that the contributions sought from employees range from compliance to creativity.

Routine work activities are usually *prefigured*, that is, they are designed in advance, by others, for the worker to carry out. Routine work activities are frequently repetitive and often documented in the form of a written procedures manual. Assembly line work is the classic example of prefigured work.

Non-routine work activities are almost always *configured*, that is, they are developed by the worker, typically in response to the requirements of a given situation. Because they represent more or less

# WRITING GOOD WORK OBJECTIVES

unique responses, non-routine work activities cannot be prefigured. Nor are they easily documented, except in a very general way. [(One can document the general process of project management, for example, but a particular project defies documentation in advance.)]

Although everyone's job contains some mix of routine and non-routine work activities, some jobs are almost completely dominated by one or the other. Depending on its mix of routine and non-routine work, a given job can be placed anywhere along the diagonal line in the center of the diagram in Figure 1.

For jobs consisting primarily of routine work activities, the expectation of the worker is generally one of compliance with established procedures. In such cases, supervisors and managers might rely heavily on specifying work objectives.

For jobs consisting chiefly of non-routine work activities, the expectation is contribution toward unit, project, or company goals and objectives. In these cases, supervisors might rely more on soliciting work objectives.

In all cases, discussion and negotiation will be required because, no matter the kind of work being performed, commitment is essential to its proper performance.

## FOCUS ON RESULTS

Whether routine or non-routine, recurring or situational, all work may be viewed as a process having a result. Results are the outcomes of activity, the effects of actions taken. Work objectives for both kinds of work should reflect, in measurable terms, the results expected, not just the activity to be performed.

Placing measures on activity is not the same as developing measures of the results of that activity. For example, focusing on keystrokes per minute is a measure of a data entry or word processing system operator's activity. A useful measure of results might be the percentage of documents correctly keyed or typed.

For customer service representatives, a work objective might call for maintaining an average call duration of no more than 3.5 minutes (a measure that ties directly to the cost of calls). Another work objective might require customer service representatives to supply 100 percent accurate information as measured by call sampling and monitoring.



# WRITING GOOD WORK OBJECTIVES

One customer service representative (Rep A) produces results like those listed above and maintains an average call length of 3.5 minutes. Another (Rep B) achieves similar results but with an average call length of 4 minutes. Assuming a cost of \$1.00 per minute, the two service representatives are maintaining average costs per call of \$3.50 and \$4.00. If each rep handles 100 calls per day 100 days each year, that is 10,000 calls each. At a 50 cent differential, Rep A's results cost the company \$5,000 less than Rep B's. Which rep do you think ought to get the higher rating? Which rep would you keep if you had to let one go? (You might want to skip ahead to the caveat about measuring work and performance before making up your mind.)

Conceivably, marketing representatives could be measured in terms of the dollar value of new clients. At the same time, the desirability of these new clients might be gauged using qualitative measures of their strategic value to the business.

Managers could be measured on the number of process improvements made, their dollar value, and more qualitative measures such as expansion of the skill base in their units.

## MEASURING WORK AND PERFORMANCE: A CAVEAT

You get what you measure. Before instituting measures of work and performance, you should think through the consequences of measuring what you contemplate measuring. If you do not, the results you get might be far removed from what you are after. For example, measuring average call length could indeed lead to reduced costs per call. But it can also lead to a situation where customer service representatives inappropriately cut calls short. Generally speaking, some mix of measures is needed to balance the pressures exerted by a single measure.

## IDENTIFYING RESULTS

To get at the results an employee might be expected to produce, it is necessary to give thought to the outcomes or effects sought from the employee's work activities.

Consider, for example, a few of the results a customer service representative might produce: questions answered, orders entered, errors corrected, materials shipped, and customers satisfied (perhaps even delighted). A researcher's results might be measured in terms of the number, quality, or value of studies conducted. A program director's

# WRITING GOOD WORK OBJECTIVES

results might be measured in terms of the performance of the program, financially, operationally, or on both counts.

The attainment of results always consumes resources, either in the form of actual consumption of materials or simple wear and tear on machinery, equipment, and people. The consumption of resources incurs costs. Work objectives might also reflect the cost of the results to be achieved as well as the results themselves. The results sought from operations managers might take the form of reductions in unit costs.

As we saw earlier, the mix of work comes into play as supervisors wrestle with the extent to which work objectives should be specified for employees and the extent to which they should be solicited from employees. It also comes into play in thinking about the extent to which work objectives should focus on activity and the extent to which they should focus on results.

People whose work requires of them that they configure their responses to a given situation should typically have their work objectives expressed in terms of results, not activity. One reason for this is that the response required to produce the desired result can not be specified in advance. Another is that the management of work should always be results-centered. To begin with the task or process is to run the risk of performing work that should not be performed at all. Finally, people whose work requires of them that they figure out what to do can not be managed using an activity-based compliance model.

For people whose work consists primarily of repetitive, prefigured routines, it is possible to specify work objectives in terms of activity; more specifically, in terms of complying with the prefigured routines that define their work. The reason is that the results are a given. If the routine is carried out properly, the result will accrue. However, if attention is not paid to specifying the results as well, then the purpose of the work and its place in the larger context will be unclear. The consequences of this lack of context are well known: lack of commitment, absenteeism, turnover, shoddy work, and morale problems. In general, then, work objectives should always indicate the results expected.

The short-and-sweet sample objective given earlier, "Launch four new testing programs in the coming fiscal year," could be refocused

# WRITING GOOD WORK OBJECTIVES

on the results the four new programs are required to produce. For example, one could add words like "each of which will yield a net return of not less than 10% of expenses" or "each of which will yield gross revenue of at least \$15 million." This leads to a logical question: If revenue and net are the desired results, why not put them up front? Doing so might yield an objective like this:

- Generate at least \$60 million in revenue from new testing programs yielding a minimum net return of 10% of expenses.

Clearly, it could be the case that "launch four new testing programs" is a lower-level objective derived in the course of figuring out how to achieve the \$60 million revenue objective.

Temper the admonition to couch objectives in terms of results instead of actions with common sense. It is indeed useful to think things through and make sure you are clear about the results to be achieved. On occasion, however, the result to be realized is the execution of a previously determined course of action. In other words, work objectives sometimes focus on the ends to be achieved, and they sometimes focus on the means to be employed. Ends and means are relative terms. The launch of four new testing programs within a one-year period might be the end sought by a product development chieftain but, for a senior executive, it is the means to new revenues.

The point being made here is that the content of work objectives should focus on the work to be performed. Work is a process and it has a result. If the work is best expressed in terms of results, fine; if it is best expressed in terms of the process to be carried out, that is fine, too. Do not fall victim to dogmatic dictates (not even this one).

## EPILOGUE: A NEW TAKE ON THE IMPORTANCE OF GOOD WORK OBJECTIVES

It has been more than 50 years since Peter Drucker made famous the term "management by objectives" in his classic management text, *The Practice of Management* (1954). It has been almost as long since George Odiorne published his book, *Management by Objectives* (1965). There have been some deep and fundamental changes in the nature of work and working during the last 50 years. One effect of these changes has been to make good work objectives even more important than before. The following is meant to explain why.

# WRITING GOOD WORK OBJECTIVES

We behave in ways that serve to make what we sense match what we want. We are guided along the way by comparing our perceptions of *what is* with our vision of *what should be*. That comparison is the basis for action. If a gap exists we act to close it. That comparison also serves to inform us regarding progress and achievement. Are we closing the gap? Is it closed? Moreover, we are able to exercise control in complex and changing circumstances, countering, offsetting and negating the influences of other actors and factors that also affect whatever it is we are trying to control. We adapt, adjusting our behavior to fit the circumstances at hand. Thus it is that we successfully meet challenges and surmount barriers, obstacles and disruptions. We prevail in the face of adversity. We are, to use William T. Powers' term, "living control systems."

None of that changes when we become employees. We are still "living control systems" and we still behave in ways meant to change what we perceive so as to align it with what we want. Unfortunately, a great deal of management effort goes into trying to control our behavior, which also happens to be the very means by which we accomplish our goals and objectives. Why? Because "they" (i.e., management) view our behavior as the means by which they can achieve their goals and objectives. Therein lies a great deal of conflict, game-playing, deception and what B.F. Skinner termed "counter-control." Why? Because at any point in time we are striving to keep many, many variables under control, ranging from moving half a dozen or so projects forward to keeping the boss happy to figuring out what to do about that so-and-so in accounting to responding to the latest inquiry from HR to picking out a suitable present for our spouse's birthday. We are awash in a sea of goals and objectives, some personal, some work-related, some professional, some long-term, some short term, some clearly in view and well in hand, some behind, some in jeopardy and some still out there as a puzzle to be solved. Our behavior needs to be free from unnecessary restraints and constraints, available to us at all times to wield as circumstances demand, or else we can't achieve a blessed thing.

Control, as Peter Drucker pointed out, is always against a standard – some preferred or required state of affairs. Goals and objectives serve to define these preferred or desired conditions. In short, they define what we want.

# WRITING GOOD WORK OBJECTIVES

When work was materials-based and working was a primarily physical activity, the “one right way” could be determined and imposed. Results and feedback were direct and immediate, typically taking the form of a physical product. Compliance could be ensured through a system of rewards and punishments. The employee’s mind didn’t matter much to management and employees could use it as they saw fit during working hours. Management got what it wanted via overt, physical employee behavior. The employee was an extension of managerial will. The locus of control over working clearly rested with management.

Things have changed. Work is information-based and working activities are mainly mental and verbal. Moreover, they are configured in response to the ever-changing circumstances at hand. Results and feedback are indirect and delayed and rarely take the form of a physical product. The mind of the employee has moved center stage and employees and management vie for the uses to which it will be put. In this competition, the employee has the advantage.

In today’s world of work, management must rethink the role of the employee and revise its approach to getting what it wants. In a nutshell, this boils down to (a) getting employees to set/adopt goals that contribute to the organization and (b) supporting them as they pursue those goals. Work objectives take on important differences in this context. Instead of simply saddling employees with objectives specified by management, employees must be involved in and have a genuine say in setting goals and objectives. Why? Because if an employee – that “living control system” – is to achieve an objective the employee must be committed to its achievement. Why? Because prefigured routines can no longer be imposed in advance, compliance is irrelevant and supervision of mental activities is literally impossible. The locus of control over working has moved from management to the employee. As a consequence, the employee must be viewed as an autonomous agent, acting on the employer’s behalf and in the employer’s best interest. And management must shift its focus from worker behavior to its rightful and appropriate locus of control: the work itself.

In short, good work objectives are more important than ever before.

# WRITING GOOD WORK OBJECTIVES

## SUMMARY

Writing good work objectives is not easy.

Reconcile yourself to writing, reviewing, rewriting, and then rewriting again.

The form of a good work objective has two components: a verb-object, indicating what is to be done, and a standards component, indicating how well.

A conditions component might be included but is optional.

Work objectives may be broad or narrow in scope, short and sweet or quite lengthy, address financial or operational matters, and pertain to routine, repetitive work or to special, situational work.

Work objectives may be solicited from the person who will be responsible for their achievement, specified by that person's supervisor, or developed jointly by the two of them.

The mix of routine and non-routine work should play a key role in determining the respective roles of the employee and the supervisor in determining the substance of the work objectives.

Keep in mind that writing good work objectives involves two stages: derivation (content) and specification (form).

In all cases, work objectives should be clear, measurable, time-tied statements of the work to be accomplished and the results expected from that work.

## NOTE

A process for writing good work objectives can be found immediately after the references.

## ACHIEVING YOUR WORK OBJECTIVES – Some ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Okay, you've written some good work objectives. Now, how do you achieve them? The short answer is that you do something. You act. You change something. But, do what? Act on what? Change what?

Achieving an objective frequently requires that you change something "over here" in order to realize a result "over there." The path that connects "over here" with "over there" is known as the Achievement Path and it is part of an Achievement Cycle.

# WRITING GOOD WORK OBJECTIVES

Listed below are some additional resources that will be of assistance in achieving your work objectives.

1. [How to Achieve Your Work Objectives](#). A framework for thinking about how to achieve your work objectives when what to do to achieve them isn't immediately apparent.
2. [Goal Clarity](#). An examination of several factors that affect the task of achieving goal clarity. This is a link to the April 2015 Knowledge Workers Column in ISPI's *PerformanceXpress*.
3. [Goals Grid](#). A 2x2 matrix that makes a useful tool for setting, examining and clarifying goals and objectives. There is an [.htm](#) version and a [.pdf](#) version.

## REFERENCES

1. Drucker, P. F. (1954). *The Practice of Management*. Harper & Brothers: New York.
2. Mager, R. F. (1961). *Preparing Instructional Objectives*. Fearon: Belmont.
3. Odiorne, G. S. (1965). *Management by Objectives: A System of Management Leadership*. Pitman: New York.
4. Powers, W.T. (1989). *Living Control Systems: Selected Papers of William T. Powers*. Control Systems Group: Gravel Switch, KY.
5. Powers, W.T. (1989). *Living Control Systems II: Selected Papers of William T. Powers*. Control Systems Group: Gravel Switch, KY.
6. Powers, W.T. (1989). *Living Control Systems III: The Fact of Control*. Living Control Systems Publishing: Hayward, CA.

## A PROCESS FOR WRITING GOOD WORK OBJECTIVES

1. Spend some time initially thinking about the organization and the unit. What are the problems it faces? What processes are in need of improvement? What practices need review? What are the developmental needs and requirements of the people?
2. Think about what the person for whom the objectives are being prepared is to do. Here, you might be thinking about someone else or you might be thinking about yourself.
3. Draft a verb-object or action component.
4. Think about why that action is wanted. What results does it produce? What outcomes will it have? What effects will be created? Why are those important? What is their value?
5. Modify the verb-object component, if necessary, to emphasize results instead of activity.
6. Think about ways of measuring the work you have begun to

# WRITING GOOD WORK OBJECTIVES

- specify.
7. Draft some measurable standards the work must satisfy. How could you tell whether or not the work or results occurred? What is the measure of those results? Quality? Quantity? Speed? Money? Frequency? Ratios of some kind?
  8. Modify the action component further, if necessary.
  9. Think about the time frames in which the work is to be accomplished.
  10. Specify some deadlines, time frames, due dates, etc.
  11. Rethink it all, rewrite it, rethink it again
  12. Ask the person who is to be accountable for meeting it what he (or she) thinks it means. Or, if you're writing them for yourself, ask your boss to tell you what she (or he) thinks it means.
  13. Rewrite it again if necessary

## CONTACT THE AUTHOR

Fred Nickols can be reached by [e-mail](#). Other articles of his can be found on his [web site](#).

  
**DISTANCE CONSULTING**  
*"Assistance at A Distance"<sup>SM</sup>*