

Your Free Guide to Objective Setting

Nothing happens at work until we plan and good plans have goals and objectives. It is important to understand that there is a difference between **goals** and **objectives**.

The goal is where we want to be. The objectives are the steps needed to get there.

Goals relate to our aspirations, purpose and vision. They are general wishes and statements of intent.

Objectives are the battle plan, the stepping stones on the path towards the achievement of goals.

Specifically, objectives are pieces of work, projects, tasks and activities that help someone fulfil the current priorities in their job.

Here are some important features about objectives:

- **They are taken from key areas of the job description.**

This means that they relate to the main areas of an individual's work – the areas where they are personally responsible for achieving results and contributing to the overall performance of the team.

- **Objectives are usually associated with bringing about improvements or achieving changes which improve efficiency, performance and value.**

This is because they are linked to the main areas of the job – the ones a jobholder is judged on and those that would be missed if not done. They are usually about taking things forward rather than maintaining the status quo.

- **Objectives should not be confusing: the job holder should be in no doubt as to why they are being asked to make this contribution.**

When agreeing objectives, it is useful to identify what distinguishes this job from that of your job or those of other team members. Think of their job as a distinct piece of the jigsaw with its own elements of contribution.

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- **Organisational objectives should give rise to divisional or departmental objectives, which in turn should give direction to individual objectives. An individual should be able to trace back the contribution they are making by achieving an objective, to an overall plan.**

This means that ideally, the line manager needs to be clear about their own objectives as well as the objectives of the team and ultimately the organisation, before they discuss individual objectives with team members.

- **Objectives to should be agreed between manager and staff member.**

The process is a joint one with the jobholder having input. The exception to this is when someone is brand new to the job, but even then, they may have some good ideas about what they should be focussing on. Imposed objectives are far less likely to be achieved.

- **Objective setting is an on-going process, needing regular review and action, not an annual event.**

Appraisal time is when to review and plan objectives but it should not be the only time. Objectives are the job so they should feature regularly in conversations, updates and supervision meetings.

- **Objectives should be flexible enough to take account of changes.**

If priorities change, objectives may need to change too to remain current, however, good planning and a good knowledge of organisational objectives should avoid too much of this. Objectives need to be a real expression of the current priorities of the job.

- **Objectives should help not hinder an individual to fulfil their job responsibilities.**

They are not additional to the job – they are the job and the person being asked to achieve them should see this and have a big part in determining the objectives they are being asked to achieve. Ideally objectives should be agreed not imposed.

Why Do We Have Objectives?

Everyone has a job description. It is a one-off statement of purpose about the job containing its key tasks or responsibilities. The job description does not change unless the job changes significantly. It is a static document. Work on the other hand, is dynamic. Our activities need to reflect the current priorities of our organisation as well as how we contribute to the overall plan.

This is why we have objectives. They are dynamic. They represent the job and its focus for the current period and enable us to have direction in what we are doing. Even if a job is fairly static with little scope for change, there will still be a certain amount of re-focussing and change.

Objectives don't just belong to the person fulfilling them, they belong to the job. Therefore, if someone leaves the job, the objectives provide a map for the next person of what needs to be done, how and when. They may not be identical for a new person in the same post but they will always have some relevance.

We cannot tell people "just do your job". They need to be clear on what that means for the current period and having objectives assists with the process.

What Makes a Good Objective?

A good objective needs to specify both what is to be achieved and any constraints or limits, as well as how to measure effectiveness. It does not have to be too long winded. You can refer to standards that exist elsewhere e.g. in a document or handbook available to all. You also want to avoid expressing in the objective exactly how it will be carried out and achieved. Remember, objectives are not usually rote activities, they need to represent some challenge, otherwise there is nothing to be achieved.

Good objectives will relate to the key responsibilities of the job and will enable some personal or professional development for the person. That way you grow the confidence and skills pool of the team.

Good objectives are measurable – they have to be because you can only manage and monitor what you can measure. This is dealt with in the next section.

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Measuring Objectives

As well as the objective specifying what is to be done, it needs to convey how work and results will be measured with clearly defined standards of performance.

The test of whether an objective is measurable or assessable is whether or not you can answer the question: “How will we know when the objective has been achieved?” It is not enough to want a good result; we have to define what “good” will look like. If you do not do this, you are effectively saying, do the work, how and when you do it is completely up to you. We rarely mean to say that when we agree objectives!

All work can be measured in one or more of four ways:

Time – how long something will take, a time limit or a turnaround time. At the very least you should be able to put in a time measure that says when you will review progress on the objective.

Money – how much something will or should cost, budget limits and constraints or in the case of sales/fundraising based jobs – how much profit or income is to be generated.

Quantity – how much needs to be done/how many of something to be produced or processed; this is measurement by numbers and is usually closely connected to timescales e.g. a call centre may measure the number of calls dealt with every hour.

Quality – how well something is to be done/the standard to which something is done. Many departments have quality standards they work to which makes measuring objectives a lot easier. Some jobs have standards they must adhere to by law or choose to follow as good practice. If you don't have these, you may want to consider writing some to answer the question “What does success or excellence look like?”

Some objectives can be measured in all four ways.

It is easier to measure certain objectives more than others. Some jobs have clear measurable outputs, time limits and budget constraints. For other jobs, however, a successful outcome depends more on quality than quantity – how well something is done. Where quality is a priority, you will

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need to find ways to “paint a picture of success”, i.e. describe what the successful achievement of the objective will look like.

Here are some examples of objectives with performance standards:

Objective

To develop an effective client information system for the section

Performance standards

- Information can be readily located with a file for every client formatted consistently
- All information is inputted within 3 working days
- New files opened within 2 working days of request
- Any contact is recorded in date order

Objective

To provide an effective internal IT advice service for colleagues

Performance standards

- Telephone answered within 5 rings
- Initial acknowledgement of all queries and voice mail messages within 2 hours
- Resolution of problem within 24 hours or, if not, customer kept informed of progress
- Correct identification of root problem
- Positive feedback/lack of complaints about the service

Useful wording when measuring work

Words and phrases that are useful in producing performance standards are given below. As you draft the objectives you will identify your own wording for performance standards. You may also find that colleagues have developed some useful wording, which you can share.

Words which are useful in producing assessable performance standards

- Within X hours/within X days/within agreed deadlines
- So that I can...
- Plain English, no jargon
- Comprehensive
- Accurate/fewer than X% errors
- Feedback from managers/colleagues/customers
- According to ISO 9002/Organisational standards/codes of conduct
- Within budget
- Recommendations and conclusions clearly supported by evidence
- Advice sought by a variety of people

Agreeing SMART Objectives

SMART is an acronym that describes the key characteristics of meaningful objectives. It is useful to have as a checklist to ensure your objectives pass every test and can form part of your staff member's plan of work.

Specific

Specific means that the objective is concrete, detailed, focused and well defined. That is, the objective is straightforward, emphasises action and the required outcome. Objectives need to communicate what you would like to see happen. To help set specific objectives the following questions may be of use:

What am I going to do? These are best written using strong, action verbs such as conduct, develop, build, plan, execute, etc. This helps your objective to be action-orientated and focuses on what is most important.

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Why is this important for me to do?

Who is going to do what? Who else need to be involved?

When do I want this to be completed?

How am I going to do this?

Measurable

We have dealt with this in the previous section.

Achievable

Objectives need to be achievable, if the objective is too far in the future; it is difficult to keep motivated and to strive towards its attainment. Objectives, unlike aspirations and visions, need to be achievable in the short and medium term to keep up motivation. Whilst being achievable, objectives still need to be stretching but not so much that people become frustrated and lose motivation. If we overload people with objectives, the total will not be viewed as achievable, even if individual ones are.

Relevant

There needs to be a clear link from the objectives to your team/department and organisational objectives. They should not be viewed as isolated from the work of the section.

Time-based

Time-based means that objectives need to have an agreed timescale or turnaround time. It also means setting deadlines for the achievement of the objective. Deadlines create the all-important sense of urgency. If you don't set a deadline, you will reduce the motivation and urgency required to execute the tasks. Turnaround times can be particularly useful for objectives where the work is reactive, advisory or repetitive.

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Summary

Objective setting is worth the effort. It means everyone knows what they are supposed to be doing and there is no ambiguity or uncertainty. Objectives keep the organisation on track to achieve its goals and keep us focussed, developed and motivated.

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