

OBJECTIVES?

Get Over Them.

By Danny Langdon

Once a breakthrough in defining the end point of training, objectives aren't specific enough for the design and development of performance-improvement activities. Instead, try using proformas. Here's how.

People have been using objectives to define the end point of training and performance-improvement activities for several decades. Though objectives were a major breakthrough in the early 1960s, for the most part they're inadequate for current broad performance-improvement needs, and they've outgrown their usefulness for analytical design purposes. However, objectives are still useful for the communication of performance intent. In the past, they provided insight into the design of instruction and training and saved millions of hours of searching for the relevant events, content, and practice. But it's now time to replace the sacred cow with alternatives that are more complete and concise for analyzing the needs of performance. These new approaches will serve us better in selecting the relevant events, content, and other needs of instruction. They will also help us meet the broader performance needs of business.

Once upon a time

Objectives were once *the* way for instructional technologists and others to define performance during analysis. Objectives served as a prelude to instruction, communicating instructional and learning intent to learners and instructors. There's hardly a language in the world that doesn't refer to objectives. Their value has been that they provided the most succinct way to express outcomes in observable and measurable ways. Objectives call for action verbs; goals, you will note, use plain old verbs without action and direct measurability. The action verbs of objectives tell how the desired behavior will be exhibited and measured. Objectives also specify the content and conditions in which the desired

How to Write a Proforma

Begin with the outputs. First, identify what the individual, work group, business unit, or process is to achieve in the way of deliverables to meet business or learning goals. Those become the performance targets, along with the associated consequences to be achieved.

Define the inputs. Determine which resources will be needed or used to produce the outputs and achieve the consequences.

Define the conditions. Determine which internal and external conditions exist (or need to exist) that will influence or govern the use of the inputs, the process to be followed, and the feedback that will be solicited or used.

Define the consequences. What are the anticipated or planned results desired from the various outputs? *Note: Consequences may be defined after outputs, but because they often depend on knowledge of the inputs and conditions, I prefer to define them as the fourth step in the definition of a proforma.*

Define the process. Determine the steps or system needed to be completed in order to use the inputs to produce the outputs and consequences—under the conditions that influence the performance and aided by the feedback.

Define the feedback. Ask what feedback would be useful while the performer is engaged in the process, and what feedback would be useful following outputs or as part of consequences to measure and tell the performer that his or her performance is correct or needs correction.

behavior will be demonstrated and the standards that the behavior should achieve. For decades, that level of specificity—compared with only goals and content—has been considered accurate for analysis and design purposes; it also communicated to learners what would be learned. The pioneers of objectives, such as Robert F. Mager, noted that sometimes all you have to do to achieve learning is give a person an objective.

Now, objectives have been reinvent-

ed and popularized in a concept known as *competencies*. In fact, competencies are objectives masquerading as something new because they become objectives once skills are attached to them. Competencies actually serve no greater purpose than objectives and add no greater level of effectiveness in analysis, design, or communication. Competencies add no value in the attempt to be clearer about what we analyze, design, or communicate. They don't contribute to performance, although they do make people feel good. Creating competencies for such areas as "verbal communication" may help describe the difference between what's expected of a receptionist or a senior vice president, but neither person can learn to perform at an acceptable level through competency statements.

Inventing a new title for an old concept is like renaming *reengineering* as *alignment*, without making reengineering any more effective. That doesn't mean that businesses shouldn't use competencies or objectives. But performance-improvement professionals ought to be in the business of finding better ways to do things than relabeling and rehashing.

The power of the analysis, design, and communication of performance, including training, is in knowing what level of specificity to use when and where. In today's world of performance requirements, with their multilevel business applications and intervention solutions, objectives are less usable and effective than other available options. Objectives don't support the decision making required to select interventions. As static ends of performance requirements, objectives lack a picture of the action that mirrors the performance. What's needed is a mirror image of the performance requirements.

Beyond objectives

In my view, we have been steadily evolving to a more complete and accurate process of defining performance. We really haven't known how best to define performance until recently. Various levels of specificity have been contributing to our understanding. For example, goal definitions have helped managers agree on the overall capabilities to be developed. So, for example, managers might leave a planning meeting having

decided that "call center employees will be the benchmarks for politeness." That's a goal that will involve a number of activities to achieve.

Content descriptors help us see the enormity of a performance situation and place various elements into a general context. So, the content descriptors would specify the various areas for achieving the goal statement, such as "answering the phone within two rings, identifying oneself, reporting on activities while looking up data, and so forth." Objectives help define the targets of performance intent and guide measurement needs. Even various forms of stimulus-response specification, such as flow diagrams and algorithms (the most intricate level of specificity), can assist with complex analysis and job-aid development. Among all levels of specificity, there is no question that objectives represented the major, profound breakthrough in performance specification. Still, there's something missing in our arsenal of performance definition needs—a need that objectives, for all their years of usefulness, can't fill.

The chief limitation of objectives is that they're designed to set the targets of performance—to describe what is to be achieved by learners or the organization, if oriented to those ends. Objectives are static in that they specify what learners are to achieve, but not what the performance behavior is composed of and how the elements interact to achieve the ends.

Here's a typical objective relative to a contract-administration performance need at a large construction and engineering firm: "Within the prime contract and company policy guidelines, write contracts with subcontractors that meet specific contract needs and stay within the approved project budget."

That statement has all of the requirements of a well-written objective. It has an action verb, content on which the action is to be directed, conditions under which it is to be performed, and a standard that it must achieve. It is a typical objective. It contains key information as one part of an overall needs analysis which, when viewed with other objectives, would seemingly define the total need for a contract-administration training program. From such definitions of objectives, we have developed job aids, instructional requirements, exercises, assessment instruments, and other instructional inter-

ventions. Instructional designers have been doing this kind of analysis and development for years. The basic question now: Are objectives sufficient for performance-improvement needs in work environments that occur at multiple levels (individual, work group, business unit, and process) and are usually best solved by multi-intervention approaches that may not even use training or instructional solutions? Related questions:

- Are there better paradigms for designing training?
- Are there better and more complete paradigms for analysis and development?
- Are objectives passé; have they outlived their usefulness?
- It is time to build on the foundation objectives have provided?

Proforma statements may provide greater clarity.

Proformas

In the early 1980s, Donald Tosti developed an interesting performance term, *the healthy organization*. His work was the precursor to what we think of now as an organizational scan. Tosti defined performance at the organizational level in terms of four interrelated elements: input, conditions, process, and outcomes. If an organization's performance can be described in the context of all four elements, we begin to form a dynamic view of performance that can be applied to any level of performance. That insight led to my developing *proformas*, because the term means, according to *Webster's*, "to provide in advance a prescribed form." Proformas are a key element of a total view of performance, described in part in my book *The New Language of Work: Proforma* and a new book, *Human Performance: Leveraging the New Language of Work Model in Organizations*, published by Jossey-Bass. Tosti, Joe Harless, Roger Kaufman, Geary Rummler, and Dale Brethower have also created proformas.

I see performance as being composed of four parts: 1) behavior, 2) standards, 3) support, and 4) "noise." Current performance or change occurs, or should be designed to occur, in a certain way (behavior); the behavior should occur to a desired standard and will need the organization's support; and the behavior might be inhibited by the noise caused

by the human element. Additionally, performance can occur at different levels that are often related and interdependent. Those levels are the individual, work group, business unit, and process. A proforma is used to define performance at each of those levels and in terms of any of the four parts that performance is made up of—behavior, standards, support, and noise.

For example, the sample proforma in the table represents a behavior proforma at the individual level. It describes (mirrors in behavioral terms) what an individual will do with the performance that is defined in the proforma. If you compare the objective in contract administration described on page 55 with the proforma, you can see that there is added detail and dimension. In the sample proforma, one can also define the standards, support, and noise that will be required for the desired behavior's outputs, inputs, conditions, consequences, process, and feedback. The proforma then becomes a complete, concise mirror image of all of the performance requirements.

A proforma can be defined as a prescription of the behavior, standards, support, and noise requirements that mirror the action elements of performance at the individual, work group, business unit, and process level of an organization. Proformas may be used to describe both the "as is" and "to be" requirements. Thus, they describe fully the performance gap as a precursor to performance improvement.

Basically, for analytical purposes, performance technologists need a way to define performance that is more complete and accurate than objectives. That more complete definition will serve our needs better during the analysis, design, development, implementation, and evaluation of training and other interventions to meet a performance need. The definition has to be concise and easy to communicate—especially to executives and to people with the performance in need of solution. In expressing their observations about performance, those people need models to make explicit what is implicit. They have to be able to see the gap between what is and what ought to be. When the gap is concise and clear, they become committed to its solution and they

themselves can suggest needed interventions.

The six elements of proforma are

1. outputs
2. inputs
3. conditions
4. consequences
5. process
6. feedback.

A proforma has all of the features of an objective, combined with the action requirements that describe a performance behavior. Thus, in objectives and in proformas, we find these elements:

- conditions
- the action verb of an objective embedded in the process
- the content of the outputs.

Only the standards are missing, though they're included in another part of the proforma model. Standards are not included in a proforma statement because they're not part of the behavior. Standards describe what the behavior must achieve to be acceptable. The elements of input, consequences, and feedback found in a proforma are additions not found in objectives, which also lack other subtleties. The six elements of a proforma provide the relationship between the aspects that define the desired performance behavior, instead of just describing a target as objectives do. In other words, a proforma represents how the performance elements interact, not just a behavior to be achieved.

Objectives are similar to the responsibility or accountability statements of a job; a proforma is not only that, but also an operational how-to guide and a complete job description. Many other levels of detailed performance information are found in a proforma but not in objectives. These differences include but are not limited to

- more detail on the performance behavior, including inputs, conditions, consequences, process, outputs, and feedback. All of that information is critical to designing either instruction or noninstructional interventions to meet the performance need. For example, a proforma helps design assessment instruments, job aids, instructional materials, and so forth.

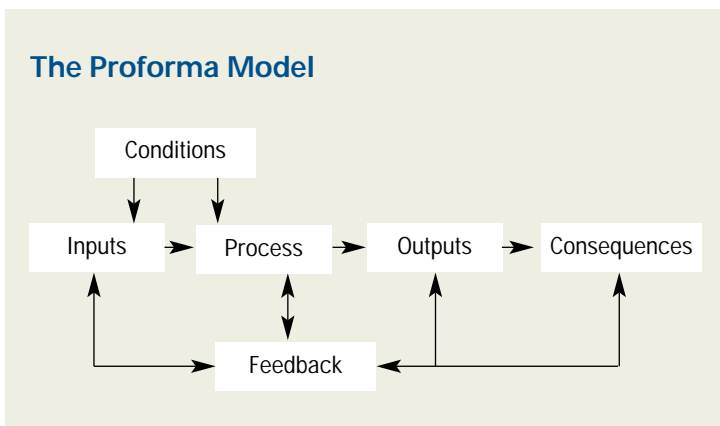
- what to measure. First, measure whether outputs and consequences have been attained. If either is not achieved, then measure for the root cause of the failure in the inputs, conditions, process, or feedback. Though objectives tell what to measure, they provide little, if any, infor-

mation on root cause.

□ a complete picture of the performance activities rather than just a target of performance to be achieved. A proforma describes the relationship between inputs that need to be processed; the effect of conditions on process, inputs, and feedback; and other such relationships.

Objectives don't provide that kind of useful information. Proformas do.

So, are objectives really passé? No, not really. But they have taken a new, more useful place in the total process of human performance improvement. In the past, they served to educate a couple of generations of designers, executives, and performers that if they didn't define where they wanted to go, anyplace that they arrived would be OK. Objectives are still the communicators of intent.



Having said that, it's time to recognize that objectives have outgrown their usefulness as a means for doing performance analysis. They're incomplete and lack the level of detail needed to make design, intervention selection, and development decisions. They lack the clarity of information for supporting measurement in general, let alone defining what to mea-

sure if some performance improvement isn't achieved as a result of the interventions. However, objectives can still communicate to learners what they are expected to achieve.

As the future unfolds, another level of specificity may arise that achieves even more clarity of design, development, and communication than proformas. But for now, let us move beyond objectives to proformas.

Use objectives, if needed, to convey information, but use proformas to analyze, design, develop, and implement performance interventions. □

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A Sample Proforma

Here's an example of a proforma. This one's for the capability "writing contracts for a subcontractor." The shaded items are areas that would be included in a definition of the objective for writing a contract. The additional items are the result of writing a proforma.

OUTPUTS

Subcontracts signed

Transmission of plans and specs.
Request submittals and subproject information.

INPUTS

Prime contract

Blank subcontract forms
Subcontractor's proposal
Estimator
PE
contract administration staff

CONDITIONS

Time limitations
Regulations
Division policies
Use of blank Short Form SF for subcontracts under \$25,000
Other policies

CONSEQUENCES

Subcontractors perform.
Budgets are maintained.
Client is satisfied.
Division is legally defensible with subcontractors.
Work starts and ends on time.

PROCESS

Compare prime contract to Form 254.
Identify additions to boilerplate that must be made.
Obtain approval on changes. Insurance and indemnification sections (Form 254 not used by all parties).
Write changes into contract.
Obtain signatures from subcontractor.

FEEDBACK

From client
From project manager or staff
From legal department
From subcontractor
From contract administration staff