

The S.M.A.R.T Approach

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1 Introduction

The S.M.A.R.T. Approach [8][9] is an attempt to standardize the writing of effective objectives, to establish a controlled workflow and therefore to ease management in the sense of management by objectives. However one of the main problems of this approach is, that there is no standardized definition of it. The acronym of smart objectives might have occurred the first time in an Publication of George T. Doran [8] who claimed that "most managers still don't know what objectives are and how they can be written" and that "characteristic of management excellence is a climate in which company officers and managers talk in terms of objectives" and therefore makes arguments for a standardized and effective way to write objectives. He argues that the S.M.A.R.T. Approach can fulfill this task and also describes requirements of an organization in form of salary structure and job fit to fully realize the potential of this method. Doran introduced S.M.A.R.T. as the acronym meaning Specific, Measurable, Assignable, Realistic, Time-Related but one of the more common ones is used in the form of Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, Time-Bound. Doran's publication being almost 40 years old, this method is widely known and there are many alterations and derivatives of it in use. This work aims to give an overview of the initial intention of the approach by Doran and its most common usage.

2 Goals vs. Objectives

Objectives are seen as an important part of Organization communication by Doran [8]. There exist many different definitions of objectives and goals in which they change its roles eventually. Since for clear communication it is important to clarify vague or variably used. He argues that the definition is not important as long it is used in the same way in one organization, at least on executive level. For this reason two of the more common usages of these terms which also align with the usage of the terms which Doran used in his publication are being presented here.

Goals

"Goals are the specific result or purpose expected from the project. The project goals specify what will be accomplished over the entire project period and should directly relate to the problem statement and vision. The goal is achieved through the project objectives and activities." [3]

Objectives

"Objectives are the specific steps that lead to the successful completion of the project goals. Completion of objectives result in specific, measurable outcomes that directly contribute to the achievement of the project goals." [3]

3 The S.M.A.R.T. Approach to write effective Objectives

As mentioned before there exist many acronyms based on the term S.M.A.R.T. floating around in publications and the internet. The exact definition can vary and different versions may suit different tasks or organizations. For this reason the most common acronym is being presented here in which S.M.A.R.T. stands for Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, Time-Bound [6]. The chosen criteria are supposed to be applied on objectives as tightly as possible but as abstract as needed according to Doran [8].

Specific

The objective should be clear and specific so it's tangible and therefore easier to motivate the assigned people to achieve it. The following questions can be useful to determine if the objective is specific enough:

- What do I want to be accomplished?
- Why is this objective important?
- Who is involved?
- Where is it located?
- Which resources or limits are involved?

Measurable

It's important to have measurable objectives, meaning to be able to quantify them or at least suggest an indicator of progress. This helps to stay focused on the intended objective and meet the deadline. It also helps in evaluating the objective and track the progress made on it. A measurable objective should address questions such as:

- How much?
- How many?
- How will I know when it is accomplished?

Achievable

An objective also needs to be realistic and attainable to be successful. In other words, it should stretch the abilities but still remain possible. When setting an achievable objective, it may be possible to identify previously overlooked opportunities or resources. An achievable objective will usually answer questions such as:

- How can the objective be accomplished?
- How realistic is the objective, based on constraints, such as financial factors and other resources?

Relevant

This step is about ensuring that the objective matters, and that it also aligns with other relevant objectives. Its supposed to brings progress for the associated goal this objective is part of. A relevant objective can answer "yes" to these questions:

Does this seem worthwhile?
Is this the right time?
Does this match our other efforts/needs?
Are the assigned people the right ones to reach this objective?
Is it applicable in the current socio-economic environment?

Time-Bound

An objective needs time frame. In this version it is requested in a form of a target date, so that there is a deadline to focus on when the objective has to be finished. This part of the SMART objective criteria helps to prevent everyday tasks from taking priority over your longer-term goals on the one hand and to make the objective more measurable on the other. A time-bound objective will usually answer these questions:

When? What can I do six months from now? What can I do six weeks from now? What can I do today?

4 The Right Conditions

According to Doran [8] it is very important to set the right conditions in an organization to be able to establish an environment for effective use of smart objectives to gain maximum productivity. In his opinion the most important part is to find the right job fit for employees so they can bring in their personal strengths where it is most effective. Since job requirements can change quickly over time, job fit evaluation is needed on a regular basis. He argues that therefore "radical change is needed in the position evaluation and salary structure" so that it is possible to move up or down in positions independent of the salary and reputation. Doran also claims that it is the job of a excellent manger to move people to their job fit and if not possible remove them. He argues that "if a manager has persons in the wrong job, require him to face up to the reality of it, or be penalized. The immorality lies in failing to tackle the problem, not in beeing soft about it."

important: as tight as possible and as abstract as needed critics today: performance indicator

5 Critics

Searching for it there is much critic to be found about the S.M.A.R.T. Approach. One of the more common ones is, that dividing goals into smart objectives which fulfill all the criteria is too narrow and doesn't let enough room for flexibility and lacks therefore agility [7][1][2]. Another critic is, that dividing every problem or task into objectives could lead to lose the focus on the main goal [1].

Doran states that objectives may be clarified as abstract as needed and may be divided into subobjectives to actually be worked on. So the argument of beeing narrow gets inadequate in the approach described by him.

The problem is, which can also be viewed as the biggest point of criticism, that there is no standard definition of that approach. It's not even certain when the term has been used the first time. Some cite Doran's article [8] as the first occurrence [5][4]. The way he uses the term in his explanation of smart objectives suggests that the term might has been used and therefore introduced before though. Sometimes also Peter Drucker is named as the creator [4].

References

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