



PERFORMANCE OBSERVATIONS

Purpose

The goal of a performance observation is to accurately document the steps, procedures, tools, and decisions used to accomplish current performance (see box 3A.3).

Needs Assessment Applications

To fully understand what is involved in accomplishing current results, you should use performance observations to document the current individual or team processes. Performance observations can, thereby, provide essential information in the analysis of current performance (or information that is helpful in determining what is working and what is not working in the current process).

Information from the performance observation can then be compared and contrasted with information from other sources (such as interviews with expert performers, statistical performance measures, task protocols and procedures, best practices for the task, and performance standards for desired performance).

Box 3A.3 Sample Uses of Performance Observations

- Identify procedural breakdowns in current delivery of HIV/AIDS medications.
- Modify procurement process to reduce redundancies.
- Reduce the time required to conduct inspections to identify potholes in roads.
- Improve team member collaboration.

Advantages and Disadvantages

Advantages

- By observing without interfering, you can create a performance observation that accurately documents the steps, procedures, tools, and decisions made in completing a task.
- Performance observations don't rely on the perspectives or memories of performers to define how tasks are currently completed.
- Performance observations can be done by multiple members of the needs assessment team to validate the findings.

Disadvantages

- Performance observations require the time and related expenses of having an observer to document the current performance.
- Observations alone may miss some of the decisions and other nonvisible aspects that go into performing a task (especially with regard to complex cognitive tasks).
- Observers may introduce biases into the needs assessment. Therefore, it is important that observers are trained in the observation process and are sensitized about biases and the need for objectivity. Having multiple observers can also be a way to address issues of observer bias. Observers should also be aware that those being observed might change their behavior, change what they say or do, or say or do things they think the observer would want to hear. The observer should consider options on how to conduct the observation to avoid influencing the person(s) being observed.

Process Overview

1. After needs (or gaps between current and desired performance) have been identified, use performance observations to document the current processes, procedures, tools, and decisions that helped achieve current results. To begin, identify essential tasks involved in the achievement of current performance (for example, develop a concept note, monitor procurement transactions, or review project reports).

2. For each essential task involved in the achievement of current performance, determine which tasks can be observed during the needs assessment. For instance, if a task will not be completed again for another 12–18 months, then it is unlikely that you can include a performance observation of that task in your needs assessment.
3. Remember that performance observations are rarely done as an exclusive information-collection process because observations should involve minimal interactions with the performers (which could be distracting and could compromise the validity of the observation). Plan to integrate your performance observations with other processes such as post-performance interviews, document reviews, or performer focus groups.
4. Before observing the completion of a task associated with the performance, review any documentation on the processes, procedures, tools, or decisions that may be used in completing the task. Having an idea of what steps are coming next can help you to focus your observations.
5. Create a performance observation protocol or checklist to ensure that you systematically assess the current performance. This step will also be valuable if multiple reviewers will be observing the performance or if multiple tasks are to be observed.
6. Select the performers to be observed. It is frequently helpful, when possible, to observe the performance of both an expert and a novice so you can isolate potential differences. For most needs assessments, as compared with performance evaluations, it is useful to inform the performer that he or she will be observed and to schedule time to debrief him or her after the observation.
7. Observe the performer while he or she completes the task. During the observation, the observer should not interfere with the performance. For example, do not stop the performer to ask questions or make suggestions; hold questions and comments until the post-observation debrief. Use the observation protocol to track activities and to make observations about how the task is completed.
8. After the task is completed, meet with the performer to debrief him or her on the observation. During the debrief, ask questions to (a) identify any unique characteristics of the observed performance that may not be relevant to your assessment (for instance, unrelated activities or interruptions that took place during the observation), (b) determine if the observation is representative of task performance by others, or (c) find out

what recommendations the performer would offer for completing the task more efficiently or effectively.

9. Write a summary report of the findings from each performance observation. Include these in the report: background information on the task, performer, and performance environment; notes from each performance observation; notes from each observation debrief; and your comments or recommendations that are based on observations.

Tips for Success

- Observe the complete performance of the task being reviewed; you don't want to leave early and potentially miss critical steps, tools, or decisions. However, for tasks that are completed over several days or weeks (such as developing a project plan), it can be useful to conduct performance observations that focus on select subtasks.
- Make arrangements early in the needs assessment process if you want to observe performance, especially for tasks that are not completed on a routine basis within the organization.

References and Resources

McClelland, Samuel B. 1994c. "Training Needs Assessment Data-Gathering Methods: Part 4—Onsite Observations." *Journal of European Industrial Training* 18 (5): 4–7.

Website

A how-to description on Find, Use, Manage, and Share Information (FUMSI) is available at <http://web.fumsi.com/go/article/use/2491>.