

How to Achieve Your Work Objectives

Introduction

I have written at length about where to get and how to write good work objectives (see [Writing Good Work Objectives](#)). That paper is by far the most popular piece on my web site, garnering more than 10,000 hits each month. But *writing* good work objectives is only half the battle; the other and equally important half is *achieving* them. In this companion piece to "Writing Good Work Objectives," I will explore exactly that: How to Achieve Your Work Objectives. Let's begin with the path that connects your actions to the results you seek: The Achievement Path.

Connecting Your Actions to the Results You Seek: The Achievement Path

To achieve an objective – any objective – you have to do something, you have to act, you have to change things. But do what? Act on what? Change what? If you already know what to do, fine, do it. But if you don't, then you have to figure out what to do to achieve your objective.

In the workplace – for most people – achieving an objective is an indirect undertaking: you change something "over here" to realize a result "over there." "Over here" and "over there" mark the two ends of what I call the "Achievement Path" – the path that connects your direct and immediate actions to the results you seek. So, let's start at the end marked by the result you seek.

To achieve a result is to bring about a desired change in the value of some targeted variable. You might, for example, depending on the work you do and your position in the organization, want to reduce unit costs, or waste levels, or attrition rates; or increase gross sales, or net profit, or share of market, or earnings per share. All those examples tie to a variable, to some element with a value that can vary. The result you seek, typically expressed in your objective, ties to that variable, which we will call the "Target Variable" and it marks one end of the Achievement Path. An objective specifies the intended value of a Target Variable.

At the other end of the Achievement Path are those variables you can affect through direct, immediate action. The value of these variables changes as a direct consequence of your actions. I call these variables "Accessible Variables," and they mark the other end of the Achievement Path (see the diagram below).

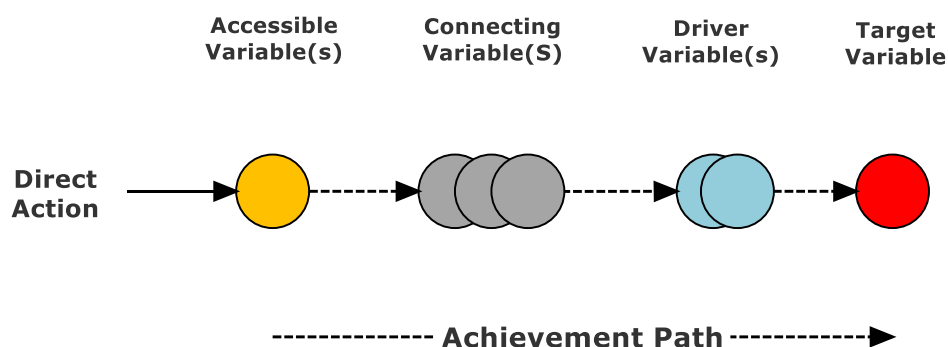


Figure 1 – The Achievement Path

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Between the Accessible Variables and the Target Variable are two more classes or types of variables. "Driver Variables" are directly connected to the Target Variable. Change the value of a Driver Variable and the value of the Target Variable changes. Between the Driver Variables and the Accessible Variables are variables I call "Connecting Variables." These do as their name implies, they connect the Accessible Variables to the Driver Variables.

Your actions change the value of Accessible Variables. In turn, those changes affect or change the value of some number of Connecting Variables. These changes then "ripple through" the Achievement Path, making themselves felt as changes in the value of Driver Variables and, ultimately, as a change in the value of the Target Variable. Such is the nature of achieving an objective, especially in complex situations.

Now, let's look at a couple of real examples, both of which serve to illustrate the Achievement Path.

Example 1: Feeling too Warm

Right now, the thermostat in my living room is set to 72 degrees. As sometimes happens, my wife feels a little warmer than she would like and asks me to turn down the temperature, usually to 70 degrees. Shortly afterward, the air conditioning kicks in and cool air begins to flow through the ductwork and out of the registers. After a while, the room temperature, as sensed by the thermostat, drops to 70 degrees and, from then on, that temperature setting is maintained. The thermostat turns on the air conditioning unit whenever it rises above 70 degrees and turns it off whenever it reaches 70 degrees. Once the room temperature reaches 70 degrees, I generally ask my wife if she's feeling better and she usually indicates she's fine. Her objective of not feeling too warm has been achieved. This homely little example is illustrated below.

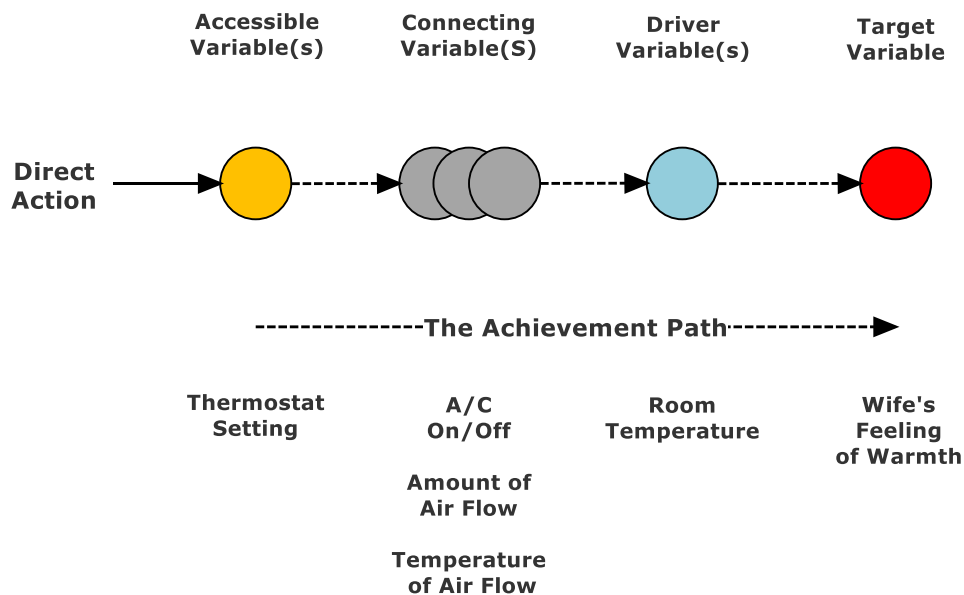


Figure 2 – The Achievement Path for My Wife Feeling Cooler

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Now, let's look at a more complex workplace example. The example that follows is drawn from my time as a division director at Educational Testing Service (ETS).

Example 2: An Increase in Charges to Programs

Much of ETS, including my division and the programs it supported, had recently moved into new and more expensive space. Compounding my division's cost-of-space problem was the fact that we now occupied more space as well. As might be expected, my division's charges to the programs it supported had increased and the program directors were demanding that I do something.

The Search for A Solution

Initially, the goal was obvious: Reduce charges to the programs. Clearly, Charges to Programs was the Target Variable. Ah, but how to reduce those charges? Here is where the analysis of the structure or network of variables comes in. Shown below is a diagram depicting the structure of the variables making up the calculation of my division's Charges to Programs.

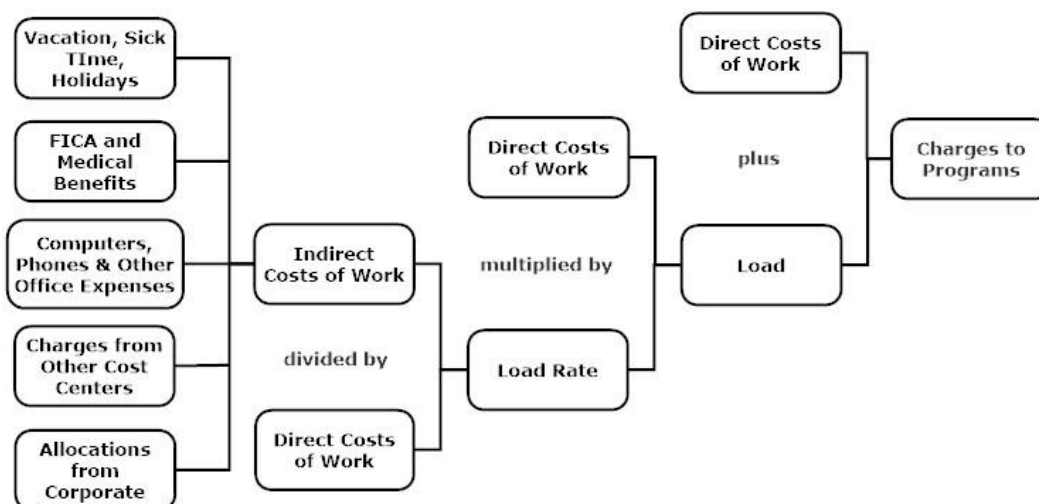


Figure 3 – The Structure of Charges to Programs

The diagram clearly reveals that Charges to Programs result from adding Load to the Direct Costs of Work. Load (think "Overhead") is calculated by multiplying the Direct Costs of Work by the Load Rate. That makes Load and Direct Costs both Driver variables, but neither of them is directly accessible. We must continue our analysis.

Load is the product of multiplying the Direct Costs of Work by another variable called Load Rate (think "Overhead Rate"). In turn, Load Rate is determined by dividing the Indirect Costs of Work by the Direct Costs of Work. We can add Load Rate to the list of Connecting variables, but, like Direct Costs and Load, it cannot be accessed directly. On with the analysis.

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As it happens, program directors were quick to suggest I needed to do something about Load Rate. They understood it was used to determine Load and it was Load that had increased. The Direct Costs of Work, which is basically employee labor charges against the program, had not increased.

The two variables that connect to Load Rate are Direct Costs of Work and Indirect Costs, neither of which is directly accessible. Direct Costs had not increased so my attention focused on Indirect Costs. Of these, the only one that had changed significantly was Allocations from Corporate. The basic structure of the Allocations from Corporate variable is shown below.

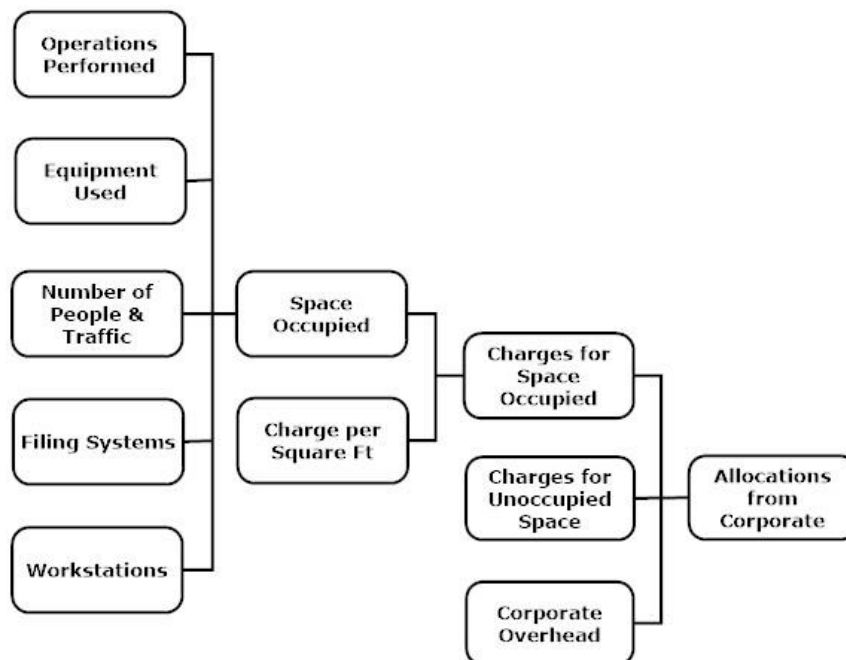


Figure 4 – The Structure of Allocations from Corporate

In the old scheme of things, my division had occupied 17K SQ FT in less expensive space. After the move, it occupied 20K SQ FT in one building and 5K in another, an almost 50 percent increase in space occupied. The charge per square foot had also gone up but there was nothing I could do about that. Consequently, reducing Load Rate and thence Load and Charges to Programs, hinged on reducing the amount of space my division occupied.

A New Goal

At this point, I had a new goal: Reduce the amount of space occupied by my division. Space Occupied now became my new Target variable. But, like the other variables, it is not directly accessible. In any case, the best I could hope for was to find a way of eliminating the need for the 5K SQ FT in Building

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Two. I had about 3K SQ FT available in Building One, but that wasn't enough to accommodate the operation in Building Two. However, I did have a measurable goal: Reduce the space occupied by my division from 25K SQ FT to 20K SQ FT. Or, said a little differently, a new Target Variable was space occupied by my division and its intended value, a new objective, was 20K SQ FT.

What are the variables that connect to and affect space occupied? They include things like people, the operations they perform, furniture, equipment, filing systems, workstations, foot traffic, etc. The operation in Building Two had a unique feature; it made use of tub files, literally, large, round wash tubs on legs. They were scattered about most of the 5K SQ FT the operation occupied in Building Two. There was no way they would fit into the 3K SQ FT of space available in Building One.

The Solution

The space occupied by the operation in Building Two was driven by the fact that the tub files required lots of horizontal space. The solution was obvious: Shift to a vertical filing system.

To make a long story short, a viable, vertical filing system was located, purchased and installed, the operation in Building Two was relocated to Building One, the 5K SQ FT space in Building Two was turned back to corporate, my division's Allocations from Corporate and Load Rate went down, as did Load and Charges to Programs. The program directors were placated.

The Achievement Path

To recap visually, the variables making up the Achievement Path for reducing charges to programs, are shown in the diagram below:

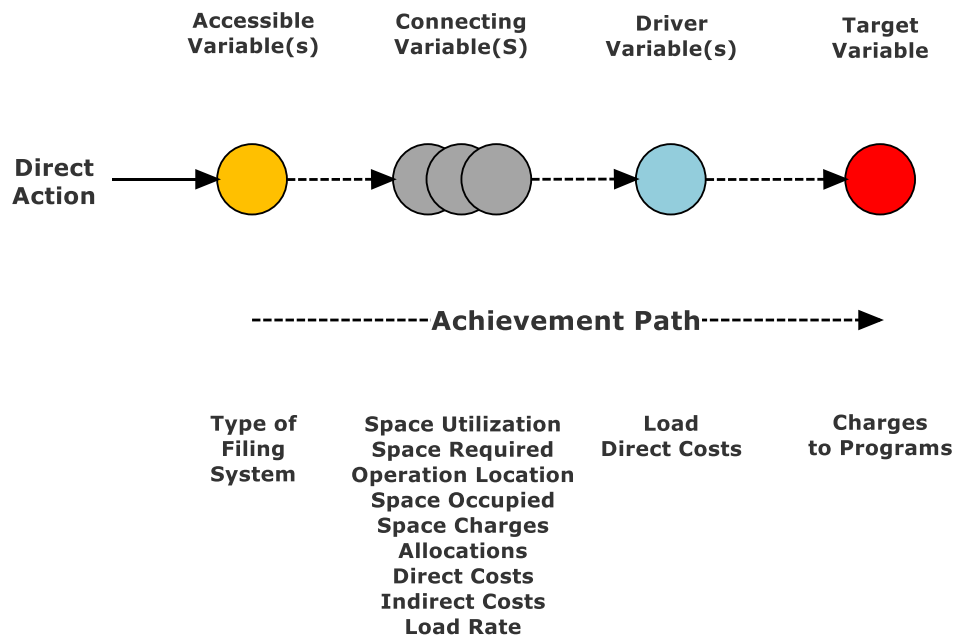


Figure 5 – The Achievement Path for Reducing Load Rate and Charges to Programs

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In action terms, the Achievement Path for reducing charges to programs looked like this:

- Shift to a Vertical Filing System
- Reduce Space Required
- Relocate Operation in Building Two to Building One
- Reduce Space Occupied
- Reduce Charges for Space Occupied
- Reduce Allocations from Corporate
- Reduce Indirect Costs
- Reduce Load Rate
- Reduce Load
- Reduce Charges to Programs

For those interested in things like financial impact and ROI, the cost of the vertical filing system was a one-time charge of \$16K and the savings from reducing charges for space occupied were \$225K annually. That's a pretty good ROI.

Summary

To achieve an objective, you have to take action. The effects of your direct, immediate actions "ripple through" the structure of the situation and, if you have things right, you achieve your objective, which is to say the value of some targeted variable matches your goal for it. The structure that the effects of your actions "ripple through" consists of Accessible Variables, Connecting Variables, Driver Variables, and the Target Variable. The path connecting the effects of your actions to the Target Variable is known as the Achievement Path and, to achieve your objective, the effects of your actions must traverse it. If you already know what to do, that's fine, just do it. But, if you don't know what to do, then you have to figure out what to do and that entails identifying an Achievement Path for your objective. You know what you can affect through direct, immediate actions. You also know what you're trying to affect – the Target Variable and its value. The task, then, is to work backward from the Target Variable, through Driver and Connecting variables to the Accessible Variables. Get that path right and you'll achieve your objective.

Some Last Words and Some Questions

It is not my intention here to present a tedious, time-consuming analytical approach. Instead, I am simply presenting a framework for thinking about achieving your objectives. When you don't immediately know what to do to achieve a given objective, think about what you have to do to achieve it in terms of the framework presented in this paper. To help that along, here are some questions to trigger and guide your thinking:

- What is the Target Variable, the variable at the heart of your objective?
- What is its current value? What is its intended value?
- What are the Driver Variables, the ones that directly affect the Target Variable?
- To what other variables are the Driver Variables connected?
- What variables are open to your direct, immediate influence, the Accessible Variables?
- To what other variables are the Accessible Variables connected?

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- How are those Connecting Variables connected to one another?
- What is the path that leads from your actions to changes in the value of the Target Variable; in other words, what is the Achievement Path?

About the Author

Fred Nickols is a writer, consultant, and former executive who spent 20 years in the U.S. Navy, retiring as a decorated Chief Petty Officer. In the private sector, he worked as a consultant and then held executive positions with two former clients. Currently, Fred is the managing partner of [Distance Consulting LLC](#). His website is home to the award-winning [Knowledge Workers' Tool Room](#) and more than 200 free articles, book chapters, and papers. Fred is a longtime member of the International Society for Performance Improvement (ISPI) and writes a monthly column for ISPI's *PerformanceXpress*.