



Journal of Workplace Learning

Personal development plans: insights from a case based approach

Peter Greenan

Article information:

To cite this document:

Peter Greenan , (2016), "Personal development plans: insights from a case based approach", Journal of Workplace Learning, Vol. 28 Iss 5 pp. 322 - 334

Permanent link to this document:

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1108/JWL-09-2015-0068>

Downloaded on: 11 November 2016, At: 02:08 (PT)

References: this document contains references to 29 other documents.

To copy this document: permissions@emeraldinsight.com

The fulltext of this document has been downloaded 352 times since 2016*

Users who downloaded this article also downloaded:

(2013), "Effect of using a personal development plan on learning and development", Journal of Workplace Learning, Vol. 25 Iss 3 pp. 145-158 <http://dx.doi.org/10.1108/13665621311306538>

(1997), "Personal development plans: unlocking the future", Career Development International, Vol. 2 Iss 1 pp. 21-23 <http://dx.doi.org/10.1108/13620439710157443>

Access to this document was granted through an Emerald subscription provided by emerald-srm:563821 []

For Authors

If you would like to write for this, or any other Emerald publication, then please use our Emerald for Authors service information about how to choose which publication to write for and submission guidelines are available for all. Please visit www.emeraldinsight.com/authors for more information.

About Emerald www.emeraldinsight.com

Emerald is a global publisher linking research and practice to the benefit of society. The company manages a portfolio of more than 290 journals and over 2,350 books and book series volumes, as well as providing an extensive range of online products and additional customer resources and services.

Emerald is both COUNTER 4 and TRANSFER compliant. The organization is a partner of the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE) and also works with Portico and the LOCKSS initiative for digital archive preservation.

*Related content and download information correct at time of download.

Personal development plans: insights from a case based approach

Peter Greenan

University of Huddersfield, Huddersfield, UK

322

Received 24 September 2015

Revised 16 February 2016

Accepted 1 March 2016

Abstract

Purpose – In light of contemporary shifts away from annual appraisals, this study aims to explore the implications of using a personal development plan (PDP) as a means of focussing on continuous feedback and development to improve individual performance and ultimately organisational performance.

Design/methodology/approach – Data were collected through an employee survey in one private sector organisation in the UK finance sector using a case study approach. Secondary data in the form of completed PDPs were used to compare and contrast responses to the survey.

Findings – Results indicate that the diagnostic stage is generally effective, but support for the PDP and development activity post diagnosis is less visible. Implications of this are that time spent in the diagnostic stage is unproductive and could impact on motivation and self-efficacy of employees. Furthermore, for the organisation to adopt a continuous focus on development via PDPs would necessitate a systematic training programme to effect a change in culture.

Research limitations/implications – This study was limited to one organisation in one sector which reduces the generalisability of results. Research methods were limited to anonymous survey, and a richer picture would be painted following qualitative interviews. There was also a subconscious bias towards believing that a PDP containing documented goals would lead to improved individual and organisation performance; However, the discussion has identified the concept of subconscious priming which implies that verbal goals may be equally valid, and further comparative research between verbal and written goals is recommended.

Practical implications – The results indicate the potential value that using PDPs could bring to an organisation as an alternative to annual appraisal, subject to a supportive organisational culture.

Originality/value – PricewaterhouseCoopers, in a recent article for CIPD (2015), reported that two-thirds of large companies are planning to rethink their annual appraisal system. One of the key drivers for this was the desire for more regular feedback. Given the recent shift in thinking, little research has been conducted into what would replace the annual appraisal. This paper therefore focusses on the extent to which PDPs can contribute to supporting this more regular contact and feedback.

Keywords Performance management, Human resource development, Workplace learning, Management development, Annual appraisal, Personal development plan

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Performance management is seen as a means of implementing strategic initiatives and managing the development of employees to gain and maintain competitive advantage. *Campbell et al. (2012)* focus on maintaining competitive advantage through human capital and place this at the core of a resource-based view of organisations. *Ghoshal and*



Bartlett (2002), having studied 20 organizations undergoing change, had already highlighted that knowledge creation was the key to competitive advantage. Campbell *et al.* (2012) note, however, that human capital cannot be owned or fully controlled by an organisation, and employees are free to move and take their knowledge with them. It is important therefore that organisations seek to develop employees to not only increase their skill set but also decrease their motivation to want to leave. Similarly, Ghoshal and Bartlett (2002) cautioned that if those who contribute their human and intellectual capital (employees) are not given the opportunity to utilise this and see the benefits it creates, they will go where they have the opportunity to realise it. In short, the resource-based view explains how human capital and social networks amongst employees can be treated as a key strategic resource such that successful performance management is a necessary requirement of competitiveness.

For some time, researchers have questioned the validity of performance management as a tool which actually delivers these results (Haines and St-Onge, 2012; Pulakos and O'Leary 2011). Where performance management *per se* is seen as not working, many organisations rely solely on an annual appraisal as their means of managing performance, and this has attracted the most critique. In most large organisations, appraisals typically take place every 6 or 12 months. A key component of the performance appraisal is the formal communication of individual feedback to employees (Elicker *et al.*, 2006), but feedback on an annual basis may often be mistimed and irrelevant to an event which might have occurred well in advance of the appraisal meeting.

This paper explores the use of a personal development plan (PDP) to both agree with the goals and provide more regular feedback and communication to employees as an alternative to the annual appraisal. Floodgate and Nixon (1994) note that one of the key benefits of a PDP is to prompt line managers to be coaches and developers of others, something which should be done more than once or twice per year. Beusaert *et al.* (2011) argue that empirical evidence for the effectiveness of PDPs is scarce. They further note that the small amount of empirical research which does exist has focussed on an educational or health setting, and very little research has been conducted on the use and effectiveness of PDPs in the private sector.

This paper therefore investigates the use of a PDP and its relationship with successful completion of workplace goals in one private sector organisation. It will concentrate on two areas: first, the diagnostic ability of line managers to discuss and agree with the appropriate goals at the first instance, whether proximal, distal or a mixture of both, and second, the support offered in terms of realising these goals. The intention is to draw a rich picture of the use of PDPs within an organisation to indicate where strengths and weaknesses lie to highlight good practice but also suggest areas of improvement. The paper offers recommendations for human resource development (HRD) practitioners to enhance or introduce a robust and value-adding PDP process.

Personal development plans

Given that employees are inseparable from competitive advantage, one of the drivers behind business success is the continuous learning of employees to be able to adapt to a rapidly changing internal and external environment. To stimulate employees to undertake learning and development activities, organisations are utilising PDPs as a strategic tool. PDPs have become increasingly popular because demands for staff to

become more adaptable and flexible have grown (Bennett, 2006) and are essential, if only for experienced staff to stay up-to-date with policies, products and other changes (Higson and Wilson, 1995).

The origins of PDPs can be traced back to the use of portfolios by artists and photographers to showcase their work (Beusaert *et al.*, 2011). Students in secondary schools and higher education then began using portfolios, and they often contained a PDP, a collection of their work and a reflective report. PDPs grew in popularity within organisations and today are generally seen as formal learning tools. Beusaert *et al.* (2013, p. 146) define a PDP as “an assessment tool embedded in a larger assessment cycle of development and performance reviews”; in other words, part of the performance management toolkit of line managers. The PDP is seen as both reflective and forward-looking because it gathers information about the development which has taken place and allows the individual to reflect on this, whilst also allowing them to plan further development, either based on this reflection or with the intent of moving in a different direction. Beusaert *et al.* (2011) note four key characteristics of the PDP: it must give an overview of what has happened in the past and indicate plans for the future, it should be composed by the employee but in consultation with the line manager, it should be used as a basis for conversations with the line manager to provide the employee with feedback to stimulate reflection and it should serve as a decision-making tool. Higson and Wilson (1995) add a further key feature which must be present for the PDP to enable success, namely, that everybody should have one including managers at all levels.

Viewed as formal learning tools, PDPs can be used for different purposes. For example, Grohnert *et al.* (2014) distinguish between formative and summative uses. Formative use aims to promote self-directed learning and foster reflective practice within the individual. The summative approach seeks to assess employee learning and performance improvements. These distinctions in turn give way to two methods of implementation: voluntary or mandatory. Voluntary use of a PDP is in line with the formative way of thinking, whereby individuals gain insight and learn from their mistakes and begin to think critically. Mandatory use lends itself to the assessment viewpoint, where performance is measured as a result of using the PDP. For PDPs to be effective, Beusaert *et al.* (2011) identified three key supporting processes: learning and reflection, instruction and feedback and the motivating supervisor. Grohnert *et al.* (2014) note that for organisations adopting the mandatory approach, supporting the PDP process is especially relevant. Higson and Wilson (1995) add that managers should be appraised on how well they manage the PDP process with their staff which would perhaps provide an indication of how committed the line manager is to the development process and how supportive they are being.

Although the PDP is seen as a positive tool to aid learning, there are some concerns. Bennett (2006) notes that there is the chance the PDP stays as nothing more than a well-intentioned plan; the word “personal” can lead to a separation from work and the organisation strategy, and they are often very short-term-oriented. Although noting this is not necessarily bad, the concern is that they may not fit with the longer-term strategic planning of the organisation. Tamkin (1996) adds a cynical view that many organisations turned to self-development as a way of reducing costs because they sought to reduce the central development function, and so the onus of development then fell on the individual. Despite these concerns, however, the PDP is a document which is

widely used as part of organisational performance management processes, so getting it right is of great importance.

Goal setting theory

Goal setting theory is recognised as a post-training motivational technique to improve task performance. [Locke \(1968\)](#) observed that the essence of the goal setting theory is that once a hard task has been accepted, the only logical thing to do is try until the goal has been achieved or until a decision is made to lower or abandon the goal. [Yamhill and McLean \(2001\)](#) add that goal setting theory suggests two cognitive determinants of behaviour: intentions and values. Intentions are viewed as the immediate precursor of human action, whereas values are seen as the subsequent commitment of those goals. [Brown \(2005\)](#) makes the point that goal setting theory is complementary to social learning theory and argues that people with high self-efficacy set difficult goals and are highly committed to them. Furthermore, people who set specific, difficult goals outperform those who do not set goals or set vague goals. Two further distinctions are made in relation to goal setting. The first focusses on the distinction between assigned and participatively set goals. [Anderson and Wexley \(1983\)](#) proposed that trainees set their own behavioural goals in collaboration with a trainer and contended that increased ownership of goals consequently enhanced positive transfer. [Feldman \(1981\)](#) took this one step further by involving line managers as well, so the trainee, the trainer and the line manager agreed to a set of mutually acceptable goals. The second distinction focusses on distal (long-term) goals and proximal (short-term) goals. [Weisweiler *et al.* \(2012\)](#) argue that proximal goals lead to better performance than distal goals, and [Brown \(2005\)](#) finds evidence that those who set both proximal and distal goals performed better than those who set only distal goals.

The goal setting theory therefore places importance on the nature of the goal, i.e. distal or proximal, and also on how the goal was reached, i.e. dictated by another (assigned) or in agreement with one or more others (participative), and so highlights the key role played by line managers. The PDP has however attracted less attention, with less empirical research available to determine the effects this can have on formalising goals and acting as a tool for both individuals and line managers to monitor their progress against set goals. The purpose of this research therefore is to evaluate the mediating effect that PDP could have in terms of individuals regulating their behaviour by directing attention and action towards achieving their goals and maintaining competitive advantage which [Campbell *et al.* \(2012\)](#) attribute to the resource-based view of organisations.

Research methods

Case study research approach was applied. Eisenhardt describes a case study as “a research strategy which focuses on understanding the dynamics present within single settings” ([Ravenswood, 2010](#), p. 680). A case study approach was therefore chosen for this study to provide a series of insights around PDP in use and in context.

Field setting

The research took place in a FTSE 250 Midshares Company within the financial services sector. Including a head office which contains all central functions, there is a field structure spread across the UK and Ireland that is geographically divided into divisions. Each division is led by a divisional operations manager with further splits into regions

and areas with management at the head of each of these. All employees are salaried, but a target-driven bonus scheme also operates for field-based employees. Training and development (T&D) is prevalent within the organisation as a people development team exists both within the head office and across the field structure. The head office team is responsible for company induction, e-learning, leadership and management development programmes and *ad hoc* company-wide initiatives. The field-based team assists with the roll out of company-wide initiatives and are also responsible for more localised training needs. A performance management programme exists, whereby bi-annual appraisals are conducted across the whole organisation, and a PDP is submitted to the head office team following these appraisals.

Research was conducted in one division in the north of England containing 48 line managers, and 208 employees working at the branch level. This division was chosen because it is the largest both geographically and by head count which should increase the validity of the findings and support generalisations.

Data collection and sample

Primary research was conducted using two surveys. One was directed at line managers who are termed the reviewer, with the other directed at employees who are termed the reviewee. Some levels of management fell into both categories because some managers agree and review their own teams' PDPs but also have their PDP agreed and reviewed by their line manager. In this case, they were judged solely as the reviewer. The survey addressed the bi-annual appraisal meeting which includes a review of past performance with a view to setting future-focussed goals based on the review. Divisional operations managers were excluded from the sample because of their seniority. Regional operations managers and area managers were included in the reviewer sample. All regional operations managers and over 90 per cent of area managers were male, and the majority had been with the company for over 10 years. Salaries for these groups ranged between £35,000 and £60,000 before bonus. The reviewer sample took into account the whole employee population for this division. Again this was heavily male-oriented (over 80 per cent) but with salaries ranging from £20,000 to £24,000 before bonus. Although length of service was still high for this group, there were more employees who were new to the organisation (two years or less).

The purpose of the line manager (reviewer) survey was to establish how much preparation they allowed for before the appraisal/PDP meeting, their understanding of agreeing development needs and the type of goals and timescales utilised. The survey also focussed on how much time they devoted to supporting the employee and the PDP process after the meeting. It was also important to establish the level of guidance and support they felt they had been provided with to enable them to successfully complete and support a PDP with their team members. The purpose of the employee (reviewee) survey was to also identify how much time they felt they had to prepare for the meeting, to establish how long the meeting took because this would determine the importance placed on it and to focus on the review frequency after the meeting was complete and development needs had been identified. In addition to the frequency of the review question, there was also a question to the employee relating to how often identified development needs are followed up to determine whether identified activities did actually take place or whether they were simply identified because the process required it.

Participants were given a series of responses for each question and asked to choose the one most closely related to their belief. The majority of responses were a numerical frequency in terms of how many times something happened: none, once, twice or more than twice, for example, or 1, 2, 3 or more than 3 h. The options for the questions to reviewees with regards to how often the development activity was carried out were: always, mostly, sometimes or never. Four possible responses were identified in these questions with the intention to not overawe the respondent with too many choices and also to remove the neutral middle ground. A text box was left at the end of the survey for additional comments. In addition to these numerical responses, six options were given with regards to development activities which could take place: coaching, on-the-job training, mentoring, secondment, shadowing and training courses. These options were provided to both groups with the intention to identify how much thought had been put into the development activity which might give an indication to how much follow-up and support would be offered but also to provide an indication of what level of transfer of training could be expected.

A response rate of 73 per cent was achieved for line managers and a 53 per cent response rate for employees. A sample of PDPs which already existed was also reviewed. These were completed as part of the regular performance management policy of the organisation and held centrally by human resources. Copies of PDPs completed within the sample division were reviewed along with copies from other divisions to benchmark the sample division and identify if the findings are replicated or if they are specific to this division.

The intention was to use this documentation as a control mechanism because it would have been completed at a time when line managers did not feel to be under scrutiny and so behaved in a natural manner. It was hoped that using this documentation as a control would help identify any bias shown by the respondent with regard to what they thought the answer should be (in response to the survey) and what their actual performance indicated from when the PDP was completed.

Results

Diagnostic stage

The results from the reviewee survey indicate that they have more than two days to prepare for the meeting, with the majority stating they have more than one week. The response from the reviewers however showed a marked difference in time scale, with the majority indicating that they gave their employees just one day's notice (Table I).

Both groups were asked how long on average the review meeting lasted. The consensus of opinion was between 1 and 2 h, although results showed a marked difference where reviewers felt the meeting lasted generally for 1 h, whereas there was a more even split with reviewees believing it lasted between 1 and 2 h Table II.

Both groups were asked which forms of development are agreed upon. There is evidence that a wide range of activities are considered and roughly the same emphasis

Q) How much notice are you generally given prior to the meeting taking place?

	<1 day (%)	1 day (%)	2-7 days (%)	>7 days (%)
Reviewee	4	3	31	61
Reviewer	0	60	23	17

Table I.
Responses are in percentages

JWL
28,5

328

is indicated between reviewers and reviewees. Coaching and on-the-job training feature heavily and are in line with the recent “Annual survey report on Learning and Development” from the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD), which indicates that in-house methods of development are more popular than external methods, with on-the-job training, in-house development programmes and coaching by line managers or peers being the most commonly used and the most effective (Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD), 2015). The unexpected feature revealed in Table III regards secondment. From the responses given, seven employees think they have discussed secondment, but only two line managers believe they have. Further investigation would be required to discover reasons for this.

Both reviewers and reviewees were asked whether development needs were linked to key result areas (KRA), with 79 per cent of reviewees saying they were and 74 per cent of reviewers answering yes.

One final question was addressed to the reviewer only which was: “How many development needs would be supported at one time?”, with 92 per cent of respondents answering two or three, 8 per cent stating one and no one stating more than three.

The survey data have indicated a general consensus between reviewers and reviewees in terms of perception of how the diagnostic stage is completed. A sample of completed PDPs within this division has also been reviewed to compare the survey response with actual performance. Where consensus appeared to exist from the survey results, inconsistency was evident in the actual documentation. Some of the PDPs that were reviewed indicated that no development needs existed, whereas the majority of those that did identify areas to be improved had highlighted tasks to be completed rather than indicating the required development to be able to perform a new task or to improve performance of existing tasks.

Where development activities had been identified, they were very general with no indication of specific, measureable, agreed, realistic and time-bound (SMART) planning; “Gain better IT skills” is one example of this where there is no indication of which specific IT skills are required to be enhanced. Furthermore, there was little indication of whether target dates set to accomplish goals were proximal, distal or a mixture of both. The common denominator for most target dates was six months, which corresponds with the bi-annual frequency of the review meeting. A poor rating on the KRA was infrequently linked to the development needs of the individual, and, when comparing a selection of PDPs from the same line manager, it was evident that the activities

Q) How long, on average, does the PDP review meeting last?

Table II.

Responses are in percentages

	1 hour (%)	2 hours (%)	3 hours (%)	>3 hours (%)
Reviewee	40	46	14	0
Reviewer	76	18	3	3

Q) Which of the following forms of development have been agreed upon?

Table III.

Responses are in whole numbers

	Coaching	On-the-job training	Mentoring	Secondment	Shadowing	Training course
Reviewee	58	63	25	7	29	27
Reviewer	33	21	14	2	19	19

discussed and agreed upon were the same for each member of their team with the same target dates for completion.

Support stage

Both groups were asked how often they review the PDP and importantly how often they review it outside the formal review period, which is every six months. Both groups believed reviews were driven by target dates agreed in the diagnostic stage, although line managers were more emphatic in their assertion which offers some hope and support for goal setting theory. Table IV, however, also introduces a note of caution because approximately one-third of both groups believe they never review the PDP outside of the formal review timescale.

One question was directed at reviewees only, and this was to ascertain how often development activity took place once it had been identified and documented on the PDP. The results were encouraging because 40 per cent answered always and 39 per cent answered mostly. There is a note of caution, however, because 6 per cent answered never.

Comparison of the survey results to the sample of completed PDPs suggested further inconsistency. A large portion of target dates were set at six months, indicating proximal goals are set but offering no indication of distal or a mix of proximal and distal target dates for different goals. Overwhelmingly, there was little evidence of target dates being reviewed. The PDP documentation provides a column to indicate the actual completion date, which was blank in the majority of reviewed PDPs. A further section allows for evidence of learning applied in the workplace to be documented, which again was blank in the majority of PDPs reviewed.

Samples of PDPs were also reviewed from the other divisions by way of benchmarking the results shown here. These samples revealed similar results because development needs were not always identified and when they were, they were very general and infrequently linked to the overall appraisal and KRAs. There was little evidence of SMART objectives being taken into account and consequently little ongoing review or summative review taking place once a target date had been reached or passed.

Two questions were directed at the reviewer only and these straddle the diagnostic and support stages. When asked if they felt confident in discussing personal development needs with their team, 94 per cent said yes. In terms of training received with regards to working with PDPs, 49 per cent stated less than 1 h, with a further 31 per

Q) How often do you review the PDP with your team member?

	Every month (%)	Every 2 months (%)	Every 6 months (%)	Depends on target dates (%)
Reviewee	15	6	36	42
Reviewer	11	11	17	60

Q) How often is the PDP discussed outside the formal review period?

	Never	Once	Twice	More than twice
Reviewee	27	20	12	40
Reviewer	31	20	20	29

Table IV.
Responses are in percentages

cent answering less than 4 h. Only 17 per cent felt they had received more than one day's training.

Discussion and conclusions

This paper has focussed on whether more regular discussion and feedback, initiated by the goals set on a PDP, is an effective substitute for annual appraisals in terms of employee development. Two stages (diagnostic and support) have been identified as being significant, with focus falling on the role played by the line manager. Based on the survey results, evidence was found that line managers understand and participate in the diagnostic stage. Reviewees believed they were given plenty of time to prepare for the review meeting, and this generally lasted for at least an hour if not longer, providing support to [Burke and Hutchins' \(2007\)](#) contention that support comes in the form of discussing new learning. It also supports the view held by Peter Drucker that managers should be innovators who create exchanges to reach organisational objectives ([Wallman, 2010](#)). No more than three development needs were identified at one time, and a variety of activities were used in line with current trends as noted by the [CIPD \(2015\)](#). Analysis of completed PDPs further indicated that a distinct diagnostic stage takes place, but the effect of this in terms of developing skills to meet organisational objectives is questionable. There was no evidence of SMART goals being set, and, in most cases, the development need was merely an instruction to do a part of their job which does little to foster development because it presumes that the employee already possesses the required skill. [Locke and Latham \(2006\)](#) note that performance is a function of both ability and motivation, and a goal will be accomplished so long as a person is committed to it and has the requisite ability to attain it. If the ability is absent, yet the requirement to complete the task is prescribed, this may lead to a reduction in the self-efficacy of the individual. [Wood and Bandura \(1989\)](#) argue that self-efficacy determines levels of motivation, and people with doubts about their self-efficacy generally settle for average solutions and average performance and to this extent training or learning transfer will be low. Reduced self-efficacy and low levels of motivation will therefore not enhance organisational performance. Evidence points to short-term planning at best, with almost all target dates on the existing PDPs falling within a six-month window; however, [Weisweiler et al. \(2012\)](#) argue that proximal goals lead to better performance than distal goals, so the importance of short-term goals should not be discarded. The documentation itself may be a contributing factor to this short-term planning because the personal details' section of the PDP asks for the "*Period covered, start and end dates*". The existence of an end-date section automatically leads people to set target dates within the six-month period between reviews taking place, and thus the opportunity for distal goals alone or proximal and distal goals to be set is reduced. The study also highlights the lack of training received by line managers on how to complete a PDP, which in itself is a development need, yet nothing was mentioned on any line manager's PDP. Further, 80 per cent of the respondents felt they had less than half a day's (four hours) training, which falls short of what would be expected if the process was to be carried out thoroughly, figures which are echoed by [de Jong et al. \(1999\)](#) who found that 75 per cent of the respondents in their survey on devolving HRD to line managers were positive about taking on these duties but with certain conditions, and the condition most often mentioned was training for first-line managers. [Lawler and McDermott \(2003\)](#) also

found a strong positive association between training for managers conducting appraisals and the effectiveness of performance management.

Conclusions from this research are that a distinct diagnostic stage exists, and attempts are made by reviewers to identify development needs and goals with target dates set to achieve them by. However, a substantial amount of further training is required to help line managers understand the differences between proximal and distal goals and to be able to identify SMART development needs rather than aspects of the job role which need to be performed. Only if this is addressed will the self-efficacy and motivation of employees be maintained along with commitment to the PDP process. Furthermore, the actual documentation should be revisited by the organisation to remove “*Period covered, start and end dates*” from the PDP so as to not restrict line managers in setting target dates for goals to be achieved.

Although the PDP literature focuses on the supporting line managers as playing a vital role, evidence to suggest that it happens in this organisation is hard to find. Both reviewers and reviewees answered positively to the survey in terms of follow-up on support needs, but the actual documentation indicates otherwise. Although there is evidence of goals being set, there is very little evidence that these are reviewed or discussed once they have been documented. McIntyre (1963) argued that objectives must be placed in writing and then used as a day-to-day working guide, but although there is clear evidence that goals are placed in writing, there is little evidence that they are used as a day-to-day working guide. In most cases, target dates had passed with no indication as to whether the anticipated development had occurred, and although only 6 per cent of reviewees answered that once set, development activity is never carried out, the reality looks different. However, Locke and Latham (2006) argue that this might not, in fact, have the detrimental affect assumed here because what they refer to as subconscious priming might be in effect. The subconscious priming effect accepts that once a goal has been accepted and understood, it remains in the periphery of the consciousness and does not need to be in a constant focal view as McIntyre (1963) suggests, and goals which are subconsciously primed may still affect performance.

Although this research focussed on one division within the organisation, evidence from a sample of the PDPs completed in the rest of the organisation indicates that many of the above conclusions would apply throughout, indicating a need for training to initiate a culture change with regards to the benefits of setting different types of goals (proximal and distal) and encouraging both line managers and employees to use the PDP to monitor and evaluate their development in a formative manner as described by Grohnert *et al.* (2014).

The organisation needs to reach a stage where development is not seen as a six-monthly checkpoint but as a regular continuous professional development (CPD) which Megginson and Whitaker (2007, p. 3) refer to as “a process by which individuals take control of their own learning and development by engaging in an ongoing process of reflection and action”. The PDP in this instance would then become one used formatively on a voluntary basis for self-directed learning and reflection rather than the mandatory use now which focuses on appraising performance.

As a study located in one private organisation, the findings cannot be generalised, but they do reveal useful issues for HRD practitioners to consider. More research into different sizes of organisation and different sectors is needed to gain a

wider understanding of PDP usage. It is also recognised that the survey style allowed little chance to discover the feelings and motives behind the answers and so could not address the specified aim of painting a richer picture; instead, useful practice has been identified, which future qualitative studies should focus on to gain further insight. Finally, the study concentrated on the use of a PDP as a physical document and expected this to be updated with progress changes. This focus on documented “proof” that goals have been achieved may in fact limit its findings, and an area for future study is to compare the relative merits of written and verbal goals in relation to the subconscious priming effect.

This study has implications for both research and practice. In terms of research, it supports the much published view that managers need training in the art of performance management in general, but specifically highlights training with regard to effectively using a PDP to enable formative employee development and transfer of training. It has highlighted a split between the diagnostic stage and support stage of working with a PDP, where one appears to be carried out but the other is lacking. Further research to comprehend the effects of this for both the individual and organisation would be beneficial and help to further understand the effects of an organisation adopting the use of a PDP in its entirety.

In terms of practice, organisations are beginning to move away from annual appraisal. CIPD (2015) note that Accenture, Microsoft, Gap and Expedia have moved towards more informal and more frequent methods of performance review, with reasons cited such as the desire amongst younger workers in particular for immediate feedback. Although annual appraisals might not take place, these organisations have not dispensed with performance management as a process, but something new and more frequent will replace them. Using a PDP as a form of continuous personal development appears a viable alternative, but, as this study has shown, for it to be a success, all reviewees and reviewers (not just managers) will need to be trained in the process, and this training and associated culture shifts may take years to embed.

References

- Anderson, J. and Wexley, K.N. (1983), “Applications based management development: a method to promote practical application of managerial and supervisory training”, *Personnel Administrator*, Vol. 28 No. 11, pp. 39-43.
- Beausaert, S., Segers, M., Fourage, D. and Gijssels, W. (2013), “Effect of using a personal development plan on learning and development”, *Journal of Workplace Learning*, Vol. 25 No. 3, pp. 145-158.
- Beausaert, S., Segers, M. and Gijssels, W. (2011), “The personal development plan practice questionnaire: the development and validation of an instrument to assess the employee’s perception of personal development plan practice”, *International Journal of Training and Development*, Vol. 15 No. 4, pp. 249-270.
- Bennett, B. (2006), “Personal development plans: evidence from research on their use”, *Development and Learning in Organizations*, Vol. 20 No. 6, pp. 13-15.
- Brown, T.C. (2005), “Effectiveness of distal and proximal goals as transfer-of-training interventions: a field experiment”, *Human Resource Development Quarterly*, Vol. 16 No. 3, pp. 369-387.

- Burke, L.A. and Hutchins, H.M. (2007), "Training transfer: an integrative literature review", *Human Resource Development Review*, Vol. 6 No. 3, pp. 263-296.
- Campbell, B.A., Coff, R. and Kryscynski, D. (2012), "Rethinking sustained competitive advantage from human capital", *Academy of Management Review*, Vol. 37 No. 3, pp. 376-395.
- Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (2015), "Annual survey report", *Learning and Development*.
- de Jong, J.A., Leenders, F.J. and Thijssen, J.G.L. (1999), "HRD tasks of first level managers", *Journal of Workplace Learning*, Vol. 11 No. 5, pp. 176-183.
- Elicker, J.D., Levy, P.E. and Hall, R.J. (2006), "The role of leader-member exchange in the performance appraisal process", *Journal of Management*, Vol. 32 No. 4, pp. 531-551.
- Feldman, M. (1981), "Successful post training skill application", *Training and Development Journal*, Vol. 35 No. 9, pp. 72-75.
- Floodgate, J.F. and Nixon, A.E. (1994), "Personal development plans: the challenge of implementation – a case study", *Journal of European Industrial Training*, Vol. 18 No. 11, pp. 43-47.
- Ghoshal, S. and Bartlett, C.A. (2002), "Building competitive advantage through people", *MIT Sloan Management Review*, Vol. 43 No. 2, pp. 34-41.
- Grohnert, T., Beusaert, S. and Segers, M. (2014), "Pitfalls of personal development plans – the user perspective", *Journal of Vocational Education & Training*, Vol. 66 No. 1, pp. 74-78.
- Haines, V.Y. and St-Onge, S. (2012), "Performance management effectiveness: practices or context?" *International Journal of Human Resource Management*, Vol. 23 No. 6, pp. 1158-1175.
- Higson, M. and Wilson, J.P. (1995), "Implementing personal development plans: a model for trainers, managers and supervisors", *Industrial and Commercial Training*, Vol. 27 No. 6, pp. 25-29.
- Lawler, E.E. and McDermott, M. (2003), "Current performance management practices: examining the varying impacts", *World at Work Journal*, Vol. 12 No. 2, pp. 49-60.
- Locke, E.A. (1968), "Toward a theory of task motivation and incentives", *Organisational Behaviour and Human Performance*, Vol. 3, pp. 157-189.
- Locke, E.A. and Latham, G.P. (2006), "New directions in goal-setting theory", *Association for Psychological Science*, Vol. 15 No. 5, pp. 265-268.
- McIntyre, J.M. (1963), "Managing for results", *Management of Personnel Quarterly*, Vol. 2 No. 2, p. 9.
- Meggison, D. and Whitaker, V. (2007), *Continuing Professional Development*, 2nd ed., Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development, London.
- Pulakos, E.D. and O'Leary, R.S. (2011), "Why is performance management broken?", *Industrial and Organizational Psychology*, Vol. 4 No. 2, pp. 146-164.
- Ravenswood, K. (2010), "Eisenhardt's impact on theory in case study research", *Journal of Business Research*, Vol. 64 No. 7, pp. 680-686.
- Tamkin, P. (1996), "Practical applications for personal development plans", *Management Development Review*, Vol. 9 No. 7, pp. 32-36.
- Wallman, J.P. (2010), "Strategic transactions and managing the future: a Druckerian perspective", *Management Decision*, Vol. 48 No. 4, pp. 485-499.

-
- Weisweiler, S., Nikitopoulos, A., Netzel, J. and Frey, D. (2012), "Gaining insight to transfer of training through the lens of social psychology", *Educational Research Review*, Vol. 8, pp. 14-27.
- Wood, R. and Bandura, A. (1989), "Social cognitive theory of organizational management", *Academy of Management Review*, Vol. 14 No. 3, pp. 361-384.
- Yamhill, S. and McLean, G.N. (2001), "Theories supporting transfer of training", *Human Resource Development Quarterly*, Vol. 12 No. 2, pp. 195-208.

Further reading

- Clarke, N. (2002), "Job/work environment factors influencing training transfer within a human service industry: some indicative support for Baldwin and Ford's transfer climate construct", *International Journal of Training and Development*, Vol. 6 No. 3, pp. 146-162.

Corresponding author

Peter Greenan can be contacted at: pgreenan70@gmail.com

For instructions on how to order reprints of this article, please visit our website:

www.emeraldgroupublishing.com/licensing/reprints.htm

Or contact us for further details: permissions@emeraldinsight.com