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The Effects of Goal-Setting on Feedback Requests

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Abstract

Prior research suggests that performance feedback enhances the effect of a goal on performance. The current study examined the effect of goal level on feedback-solicitation. Participants were exposed to five conditions: baseline, a low, attainable goal, a second baseline, a high, unattainable goal, and a fifth condition in which participants were required to choose between a high or low goal. Presentation of the high and low goal was counterbalanced to avoid order effects. Participants had the option to choose 'time remaining' or 'score' feedback throughout the testing by clicking a button on the task screen. Results were examined for frequency of feedback solicitation per condition. Feedback-soliciting responses occurred more frequently during the low goal condition than any other condition. The lowest frequency of feedback-soliciting responses occurred during the high goal condition.

Introduction

Performance feedback is one of the most widely used and effective interventions within Organizational Behaviour Management (OBM). Many studies have found that the effect of performance feedback is mediated by goals (e.g., Erez, 1977; Locke, 1967). That is, feedback has a much greater impact on performance when goals have been set. In a field study designed to reduce energy consumption in residential settings, Becker (1978) investigated the effect of goal level and feedback. Forty families were assigned a difficult goal (20% energy reduction) and forty were assigned an easy goal (2% energy reduction). Within each group, half of the families received feedback three times per week. The difficult goal group with feedback conserved the most energy (13-15.1% reduction). According to Becker, improved performance was a result of the joint effect of feedback and a difficult goal. Reber and Wallin (1984) examined the effects of knowledge of results on goal setting in an organizational setting. The study was conducted in a farm machinery manufacturing firm, with a goal to increase safety. A specific difficult goal was introduced first, followed by feedback. Goal setting increased

performance; however, the goal was not achieved until the addition of feedback. The results of this study provided external validity for previous lab studies demonstrating that knowledge of results is a necessary condition for goal setting.

In organizations, various constraints exist that may lead a supervisor to deliver an inadequate amount of feedback, particularly if the feedback is negative. As a result, feedback seeking has received much attention in the research literature, and the importance of feedback seeking has been well-established (Ashford & Cummings, 1983; Krasman, 2011). Feedback seeking is a valuable tool to reduce ambiguity around performance standards, and leads to increased job performance (Morrison, 2002); however, the relationship between frequency of feedback seeking and performance has not been reliably shown (e.g., Ang et al., 1993). Morrison and Weldon (1990) examined the effect of a difficult but attainable goal on feedback seeking behaviour. Feedback seeking occurred significantly more in the presence of a goal than in its absence. Additionally, feedback seeking and goal attainment were strongly correlated. This study examined a high, but attainable goal. Research has yet to examine the effect of a *variety* of goal levels on feedback seeking responses.

Levy et al., (1995) examined feedback-seeking behaviour over time in three contexts: public, semi-private, and private. Results showed that in the semi-private and private conditions feedback seeking increased over time. Previous studies have demonstrated the utility of technology as a source of private performance feedback. Slowiak et al., (2011) defined self-solicited feedback as feedback that can be immediately obtained by the performer at any time while he or she is performing a task. Earley (1988) examined the delivery of computer-generated feedback, assessing the relationship between feedback and performance. Self-generated feedback or self-solicited feedback (directly from a performance-tracking system) was compared to supervisor feedback, when a specific goal had been assigned. Performance was significantly higher in the self-generated condition. Northcraft and Earley (1989) found similar results when self-generated feedback was compared to organizational and supervisor feedback. Self-generated feedback produced higher levels of performance than external feedback, along with higher levels of credibility of feedback and strategy acquisition.

The current study examined the effect of goal level on self-solicited feedback. The aim was to investigate whether participants would choose to receive feedback during a no goal condition, a low goal condition, and a high goal condition. It was hypothesised that a goal would increase self-solicited feedback responses; however, when presented with an unattainable goal participants would choose to work instead of spending time or energy soliciting feedback. Although studies have investigated self-solicited feedback, few studies have examined the cost (e.g., time costs, effort) of seeking feedback (see Ashford & Cummings, 1983). Additionally, self-solicited feedback in the presence of an unattainable goal has received little to no attention. The majority of studies on feedback-seeking behaviour have employed either self-report accounts or other's accounts of feedback-seeking (Levy et al., 1995). Few studies have examined the feedback-seeking process using behavioural measures. Directly measuring self-solicited feedback allows us to examine when, how often, and under which goal conditions a participant chooses feedback, allowing us to investigate further the function of feedback.

Method

Participants

Sixty undergraduate psychology students at the National University of Ireland Galway participated in the study (age range = 17 to 63 years, *M* age = 22.84).

Experimental Task

The laboratory experiment employed a computer-based data entry task that presented fictional medical information related to an ECG reading (see Figure 1). Participants were asked to classify patient data as either within or outside guidelines.

Figure 1. Work task screen in the baseline condition. The numbers in the figure illustrate the steps that the participant was required to take to complete the task

The participant entered the patient's ID number (numbered '1' in Figure 1) in the PATIENT ID box (2) in the centre of the screen. The participant then checked the patient's gender (3), and his or her QT interval number (4) and compared it to the relevant range of numbers in the box (5). The participant ticked the appropriate dot (either within or out of range) to classify the data (6). When the above steps were completed the participant clicked on SUBMIT in the centre of the screen (7). Throughout the task, participants had the option to view 'score' (8) or 'time remaining' (9) feedback by clicking a button on the task screen.

Research Design and Procedure

A counterbalanced single subject modified reversal design (ABACX) was used. The design consisted of five conditions: baseline condition, a first goal condition (either high goal or low goal), a second baseline condition, and then a second goal condition (the alternate goal to the first goal). In a final fifth condition, each participant chose either the high or low goal. Throughout all conditions, participants had the opportunity to view 'time remaining' feedback

or 'score' feedback by pressing a button on the task screen. Feedback remained on the screen for two seconds, and participants could press either button at any point throughout the testing. Feedback-soliciting responses were recorded by the computer programme.

Results

Participants' results were examined for frequency of feedback solicitation throughout the first four goal conditions. Participants who did not choose feedback or those who chose feedback less than four times in the entire testing period were counted as 'no feedback'. Feedback was measured in two ways: 'time remaining' and 'score' feedback. The low goal first group and high goal first group were examined separately to account for the effects of goal presentation over time.

High Goal First Group

In the High Goal First group, seventeen (57%) people chose feedback. Feedback per session was ranked for each participant to establish the condition with the overall highest frequency of feedback solicitation. Overall, feedback was chosen most during the low goal condition, and least during the high goal condition. Time feedback was chosen most often in the low goal condition ($M = 1.83, SD = 3.43$) and choice condition ($M = 1.83, SD = 3.12$), and least often during the high goal condition ($M = 0.77, SD = 1.59$). Score feedback was chosen most often in the low goal condition ($M = 4.9, SD = 11.10$) and least often in the high goal condition ($M = 2.8, SD = 9.15$).

Low Goal First Group

In the Low Goal First group, sixteen (55%) people chose feedback. As with the High Goal First group, the highest amount of feedback solicited was during the low goal condition, and the lowest amount of feedback solicited was during the high goal condition. Time feedback was chosen most often in the low goal condition ($M = 2.45, SD = 3.34$) and least often in the high goal condition ($M = 1.41, SD = 2.23$). Score feedback was chosen most often in the low goal condition ($M = 3.62, SD = 6.28$) and least often in the high goal condition ($M = 2.28, SD = 5.14$).

Figure 2 displays two participants who chose feedback, with the amount of feedback chosen displayed in each condition within the graph (adjacent to the condition label).

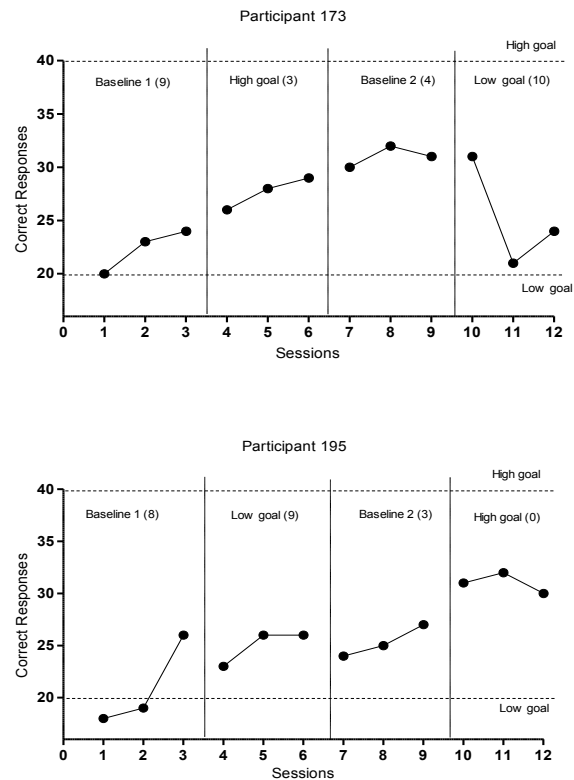


Figure 2. Performance for two participants. Condition is labelled along with the frequency of feedback chosen in parenthesis, e.g., for participant 173: In Baseline 1 feedback was chosen 9 times

Discussion

The experiment tested the effects of goal level on solicitation of feedback. Visual inspection of the data revealed that 44% of participants did not choose feedback. Ashford and Cummings (1983) suggested that if an individual is completely certain of the appropriateness of a response then feedback may not be informative. They suggested that with performance goals an individual is less likely to seek feedback as the feedback information does not add to what is

already known about the task. This may explain why almost half of the participants chose not to view feedback in the current task.

Of those who chose feedback, the feedback-soliciting response was most frequent during the low goal condition and least frequent during the high goal condition. Ashford (1986) proposed that actively seeking feedback requires energy, and that seeking feedback will depend on the store of energy that the participant has on hand. In the current study, participants may have chosen feedback more frequently during the low goal condition as the goal level was such that the participant had energy to spend on soliciting feedback. Similarly, it may have been the case that less effort was needed to seek feedback during the low goal condition as the rhythm of responding could have been interrupted more easily due to the low demand placed on the participant.

Slowiak et al., (2011) examined self-solicited feedback during monetary incentive and hourly pay conditions. Slowiak found that monetary incentives did not increase self-solicited feedback in comparison to hourly pay, even though participants performed at a higher rate during the monetary incentive condition. Slowiak suggested that the time cost of viewing feedback may have been too high for the incentive condition, as participants could not work while viewing feedback. This may be true for the current study. In the high goal condition participants were assigned an unattainable goal. It is possible that the time cost of viewing feedback may have suppressed feedback solicitation in the high goal condition.

Managerial Implications

Much of the research on feedback seeking has investigated the effect of learning goal orientation on feedback seeking. Generally, there is a positive linear trend (VandeWalle & Cummings, 1997). Despite this, when faced with a typical *performance* goal, feedback seeking may be negatively related to goal level. That is, as the goal level becomes increasingly more difficult employees may find feedback less valuable, and therefore seek it less. Performance goals are frequently seen in organisations through competition, interpersonal comparisons, and public feedback. It may be helpful for managers to recognise performance goals and goal difficulty when considering how often feedback is necessitated. It is often assumed that people who do not seek feedback do not care about their performance (Vandewalle & Cummings, 1997); however, the current research indicates that high goal level may lead to lower levels of feedback seeking possibly due to time constraints.

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