



# First Things Fast

A Handbook for Performance Analysis

by Allison Rossett  
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## Focus

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## Take-Aways

- “Performance analysis” (PA) helps you identify and reach your business objectives through measuring your firm’s progress with “data mining” and facts.
- PA is an examination of current conditions to see if you need to offer more training.
- Conduct training needs assessment after PA identifies that “a training, coaching or information solution is appropriate.”
- PA and training needs assessment are “both...methods for figuring out what to do.”
- PA can help you train employees, solve challenges, take advantage of opportunities or plan more strategically.
- PA is a compass pointing toward your goals, not a problem solving “silver bullet.”
- To check your results’ credibility, use PA’s five principles: examine situations before acting, use many data sources, rely on the data, be “systematic” and be “systemic.”
- PA seeks two kinds of data: “directions and drivers.” Directions help define your situation and goals; drivers are factors that impede or improve performance.
- Technology can assist in performing PA, but it is not an end in itself.
- Talk to stakeholders during the PA process, but don’t promise a particular result.

## Rating (10 is best)

Overall	Applicability	Innovation	Style
7	8	7	7

## Relevance

### What You Will Learn

In this summary, you will learn: 1) Why “performance analysis” is important and 2) How to use today’s new methods and technologies to conduct it properly.

### Recommendation

“Performance analysis” (PA) allows companies to determine their needs and assess their accomplishments based on data, not guesses or hunches. Whether you’re looking to improve your employees’ skills, upgrade your company’s support systems or forecast trends, accurate PA is the key to success. Business owners, human resources personnel and learning consultants must know how to execute PA. Clients who need PA usually want its findings quickly. Business moves so fast that any delay in PA risks making its information obsolete. But working quickly need not mean a drop in quality, argues education technologist Allison Rossett. With clear explanations, charts and testimony from “the trenches,” she illuminates the path to accurate, applicable performance analysis. *getAbstract* believes her insights and advice are a valuable guide for chief learning officers, organizational development staffs, and HR officers or consultants who seek to lift their workforces or clients to the next level – and who prefer to look before they leap.

## Summary

### To PA or Not to PA

“Performance analysis” (PA) helps you identify and reach your business objectives by measuring your firm’s progress toward its goals based on facts – not intuition or wishful thinking. PA requires human resources teams to work hand in hand with their business colleagues and mandates that consultants work together with their clients.

Effective PA shows your co-workers or customers a future direction based on solid information. The best course forward is most likely to arise from addressing one of these four areas:

1. **“Opportunities”** – Can you make the most of a chance to improve? Your company might increase its productivity by teaching employees to use a new technology.
2. **“Problems”** – Can you solve a dilemma or fix subpar results in some area of your business, such as sales or customer relations?
3. **“Development of a group of people”** – Can you increase your company’s capabilities, perhaps by taking a department or unit up to a new skill level?
4. **“Strategic planning”** – Can your leaders redirect the company to respond to a new challenge or to adapt to an altered business situation?

Whether your employees perform at exemplary levels or fail consistently, many causes are at work. HR and training professionals need to clarify that even when firms perform PA correctly, they should not expect to find a “silver bullet” – that is, one solution that magically solves all their training and employee preparation problems.

Performance analysis and training needs assessment are different and sequential. Clients should understand that PA is a thorough examination of current conditions to determine whether your organization needs to offer more training, and whether a “training, coaching

*“Performance analysis is critical because it is the process that enables us to provide data-driven advice about performance.”*

*“Performance analysis is partnering with clients and customers to help them define and achieve their goals.”*

*“Performance analysis is what you do first and fast. Training needs assessment is what you do to create...tangible solution(s).”*

*“Performance is a complex thing. It happens for many reasons. And when it doesn't happen, that too is usually for several reasons.”*

*“It takes a village to improve performance. Performance analysis helps define how life and work will transpire in that village.”*

*“Making a show of interest doesn't substitute for authentic use of the data. In fact, conducting numerous surveys without distributing meaningful results to the respondents will eventually produce more cynicism than appreciation.”*

or information solution is appropriate.” Once you know that, you can carry out a training needs assessment, working with the results of the PA to arrive at the right kind of improved educational programming. Enhance your offerings in educational programming and skills training only after you've ascertained – via sound PA – that such changes will address your or your clients' problems.

Performance analysis and training needs assessment are also somewhat alike, in that both are “methods for figuring out what to do.”

### PA Nuts and Bolts

The five “principles of performance analysis” shape the ultimate outcome of your PA:

1. **Examine your situation before you act** – Doing this makes your eventual actions more effective. It also helps ensure that you ground your plans in concrete, documented reality.
2. **Performance analysis requires input from multiple sources of information** – Don't rely on just the views of a single specialist, executive or even the CEO. Performance analysis should bring more voices to the table and help enlighten everyone up and down the hierarchy about the difficulties or challenges ahead.
3. **Rely on the data from your PA to support your recommendations** – This information, whether in the form of sales figures, customer comments or real-time numbers from your shipping department, are bits “of a jigsaw puzzle” that, when assembled, paint a larger, more accurate picture of your business and how it functions.
4. **PA is “systematic”** – It is “standardized, consistent and repeatable.” It provides a “defined purpose, components, data, input, transactions and output.”
5. **PA takes a “systemic approach to solutions”** – In fact, “performance occurs within a system” that draws on your performance benchmarks, your employees' skill levels, the ways you motivate and recognize them, your firm's technological resources, your methods for receiving and fulfilling orders or for dealing with suppliers, and so on.

### Goals for PA

Your objectives for using PA should be to raise your organization's training environment from “initial” – that is, it has not yet carried out any analysis of what is needed – to “optimizing” – that is, an environment in which employees gain the new knowledge they need to deal with opportunities or business threats. Leaders should actively motivate, train and encourage their workers.

Performance analysis pursues two categories of knowledge: “directions and drivers.” Directions help you determine what your current situation is and where you want to be in the future. Drivers are issues that, sooner or later, either impede or improve your company's performance. Drivers include “skills, motivation, articulated expectations, incentives, tools and work processes.”

PA helps you understand, in a general way, pending training needs assessment, the most likely best solutions to your problem or opportunity and to know who needs to be involved to implement that solution. Directions guide implementation, and drivers make it happen.

### Do It Fast!

PA is valuable in helping you deal with challenges, issues, development and strategic planning. Your colleagues and bosses will want to implement the solutions your PA

*“When you are looking at documents and work products, you are examining the ‘stuff’ of the organization.”*

*“Social networks of every sort offer the performance analyst an opportunity to develop and nurture relationships that might advance current projects or long-term professional development.”*

*“The customer is, in essence, asking us to wave a magic wand to meet his or her needs, whether that need is customer service or contemporary skills and perspectives for hospital administrators. Don’t fall for it.”*

*“Always, you are endeavoring to increase the likelihood that your analysis will move off the shelf and into the mainstream of the organization.”*

recommends as quickly as possible. To help ensure that speed is practical, take the following steps:

- **Report often** – Employ “both formal and informal means.” Provide frequent updates to facilitate communication and learning. That will raise the likelihood that your final conclusions will find a receptive audience. Nobody likes surprises.
- **Solicit information from a wide variety of participants** – Do your homework with your stakeholders. Make sure you contact everyone involved in the problem or solution you are analyzing so that you can define accurate goals. That understanding saves time.
- **“Repurpose existing data”** – If you feel overwhelmed with data, focus on your real questions. Examine information from a fresh perspective to prioritize its importance.
- **“Use straw”** – That is, give the people you interview something concrete to react to, not just a vague or theoretical idea. Offer specific hands-on materials for stakeholders’ review and response. This engages everyone at the table and gets conversations going.
- **Develop “hypotheses”** – Run your best ideas or hypotheses past your sources so they can help shape your conclusions.
- **Build a “system for virtual analyses”** – Collect information during your business day – through meetings, surveys, and so on – and keep it until you need it.
- **“Generalize”** – If an issue affects one department or unit, it is likely to affect others.
- **“Collapse the steps”** – Assemble all your stakeholders at the beginning of the PA process to exchange ideas and answer questions.
- **Use technology** – Intranets, blogs and wikis speed the conversation along and ensure that everyone participates.

### Gathering PA Data by Communicating with Constituents

Choose among the following methods of reaching out for PA information and feedback:

- **“Interviews and focus groups”** – Both are tried-and-true methods of obtaining information. Always listen closely and let others do the talking.
- **“Observations”** – Be present and take notes while others perform their job duties.
- **“Surveys”** – In-house polls of employees help clarify their interests and goals. If you don’t share the results and then follow up on their suggested changes, workers can become cynical about participating.

Planning involves doing your research before every communication and encounter. When communicating about your PA, “understand your sources,” be authentic, make sure employees don’t feel threatened by any possible changes and “emphasize planning.” You should know whether the participants in your survey group are pleased to be involved or if they’re going through the paces reluctantly because they’ve been told to do so. “Authenticity” means you are always “prepared and consistent.” Your interview subjects or focus group members will be more relaxed about participating if they know you have “reflected on their viewpoints” and take their concerns seriously. Ask if their supervisors support this investigation and how training changes may affect them personally.

### Let Technology Help You

You can conduct PA more quickly using today’s technology, including email and web surveys. While not an end in itself, technology supports traditional, effective

*“Most line managers want what they want when they want it. They want it now, not later, and certainly not if it involves waiting around for the results of a study.”*

*“Technology can provide the speed we crave.”*

*“No trend is more obvious today than the convergence of learning, information and work.”*

*“The job of learning professionals...is to create experiences that turn information into knowledge.”*

data collection efforts, such as face-to-face meetings. It also offers new paths for communication, such as “asynchronous interviews,” in which sources provide feedback via “web forums, blogs and discussion groups,” or “synchronous interviews,” that is, real-time online encounters.

Web polls – such as those you can conduct through, for instance, SurveyMonkey – are not complicated. They allow you to query large groups of people with a degree of confidentiality. Back up such surveys with more traditional methods of data gathering, such as focus groups. Your company probably already has a good deal of information available for “data mining” – such as “repair and call logs,” customer service records or production logs. Instant messaging and blogs can also yield valuable information, as can wikis, social networks and “data-sharing sites.”

### Drawing Conclusions

Once you collect the data, how will you draw your conclusions? You may find yourself inundated with information after your interviews, research and surveys. To organize your findings, follow these guidelines:

- **Consult your in-house “data-crunching experts”** – Meet with them in advance of your PA so that they can help you coordinate your incoming information.
- **Make sure your questions have “validity”** – Your queries should address real concerns and issues in your company and speak to people’s actual experiences.
- **Employ universally available tools** – PowerPoint, Excel and statistical websites can help you perform your analysis.
- **Share reports throughout the process** – Your PA will reveal a lot of new information, which you can share with others. Make sure your sources and stakeholders know that their feedback makes a difference to the process and that you value their input. If you report regularly, your audience will more readily accept your final recommendations because you will have built up time-tested credibility. “We report throughout the process so that the customers are learning as we are learning.”
- **Offer reproducible communications** – Provide material that line managers and others can easily duplicate or forward along to spread the word to their subordinates.
- **Never promise that your PA will produce a certain outcome** – This process does not have any guarantees, but you can sensibly posit an anticipated result and even attempt to test it on a small scale and improve it afterward.
- **Create receptivity** – Prepare your sources to accept an outcome that is the opposite of what they may have originally hoped for or expected.

Fast and accurate performance analysis is made up of a combination of the most appropriate approaches for your particular situation. The most important elements of PA are partnerships with your sources and stakeholders, a readiness to take chances, and a desire to absorb new information and pave the way for the right training, information or solutions for your company.

## About the Author

Training and corporate learning expert **Allison Rossett** serves on the faculty of San Diego State University. She also wrote *Beyond the Podium*.