OKRS AND SMART GOALS: WHAT'S THE DIFFERENCE?

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INTRODUCTION

OKRs and SMART Goals: What's the difference?

"[When] it comes to writing effective objectives, corporate officers, managers, and supervisors just have to think of the acronym SMART. Ideally speaking, each corporate, department and section objective should be: (SMART)." - *George T. Doran,* "There's a S.M.A.R.T. way to write management's goals and objectives"

In November 1981, George T. Doran's article, "There's a S.M.A.R.T. way to write management's goals and objectives" was published in an issue of the Management Review. In his article, Doran outlined the foundation for what would become the concept of SMART goals - a popular goal-setting approach championed by professionals and managers across countless sectors and industries.

Let's take a look at OKRs and SMART goals:

— What are SMART goals?

— What's the difference between OKRs and SMART goals?

— How are OKRs and SMART goals similar?

— How can I ensure my OKRs are SMART?

What are SMART goals?

"SMART" is an acronym or mnemonic - with each letter representing a characteristic of Doran's approach. He believed goals should be:

— **Specific:** contain well-defined central objectives

— **Measurable:** have a quantifiable element to serve as an indicator of success

— **Assignable** (now referred to as "attainable"): have a designated person for the task or goal

— **Realistic** (commonly referred to as "relevant"): must work within the frame of an individual or group's capabilities with consideration to time, resources and priorities

— **Time-related:** have an established deadline for each goal

What's the difference between OKRs and SMART goals?

There are 3 distinct differences that set these goal setting approaches apart.

1. **Depending on how a team or an individual chooses to define SMART goals, they can present fundamental differences from OKRs.** SMART goals often have different interpretations depending on the individual or team using the approach. For example, "measurement" can be replaced by "motivation" or as noted previously, "assignable" for "attainable" or "realistic" as a substitution for "relevant." And while OKRs are quite malleable and can be used for different types of environments and settings, the acronym will always mean "objectives and key results." The quantifiable element of OKRs is the core aspect of the framework. With measurement as an aspect of SMART, on a surface-level, the concepts appear quite similar. However, if the "M" for example, were to be replaced with "mission" or "motivation," the two approaches begin to contrast fundamentally given OKRs focus on measurement.

2. **SMART goals solely craft the objective.** OKRs connect key results to objectives for a more strategic appropriation of resources and time with key results at the forefront. SMART goals, however,

are a list of principles to guide crafting an objective alone - with no particular focus on key results or tactics. SMART goals provoke the question "what is the goal?" Yet OKRs ask "what is the goal and how do we get there? Objectives and key results should connect like puzzle pieces, with the intent being that if the objective were to be reached, the key results must also be achieved. Therefore, there is an added layer of accountability for reaching the objective.

3. **SMART goals are not a framework, they are a guideline.** Similar to frameworks, SMART goals offer a structure by defining criteria which is used to inform the process of defining goals. However, while many may herald SMART goals as a framework - they are simply an approach or guiding set of principles for setting and building your goals.

How are OKRs and SMART goals similar?

Their principles overlap. OKRs capture the same criteria, principles, and guidelines as SMART goals - just with fewer letters. Because of their similarity in this regard, when used together OKRs and SMART goals can create a productive harmony. Therefore, SMART goals in many scenarios can serve as a checklist for defining the objectives of your OKRs. You can develop SMART OKRs.

How can I ensure my OKRs are SMART?

To ensure your OKRs are SMART ones, ask yourself the following questions:

— Is my objective **Specific**? It's okay to think big but narrowing down on a central area improves the focus on your goals.

— Are my key results **Measurable**? How will I quantify success?

— Are my OKRs **Attainable** given resources and time?

— Is my objective **Relevant**? Does it align with my mission and direction? Are my key results relevant to the objective?

— What's my **Timeline**? For OKRs in professional team settings, we recommend a quarterly time frame.

While SMART goals are ultimately not a framework, they can serve as a useful checklist for ensuring your OKRs are crafted to the best of your ability with a focus on specificity, measurement, attainability, relevance, and timeliness. Run through the SMART goal checklist next time you're outlining your next set of Objectives and Key Results. Luckily, it's not too difficult to remember!

"The establishment of objectives and the development of their respective action plans are the most critical steps in a company's management process." - George T. Doran

If I have more questions, where should I send them?

Would you like to learn more about establishing your own OKRs? Check out our [Resources](), [Stories](), or [FAQ]() sections on [WhatMatters.com]().

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