

# The State of Performance Management 2019

Learn about the current state and future direction of performance management



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## Executive Summary

This is the 2019 edition of the HR Research Institute’s study on performance management. The challenges associated with effective performance management haven’t changed much since 2018, but there are signs of progress. This study was conducted with three primary goals in mind:

- to discover what most organizations are doing for PM
- to learn more about where HR professionals see PM going in the next few years
- to discern what the most successful organizations are doing differently

### About this Survey

The survey, called “The State of Performance Management,” ran in the second quarter of 2019. There were usable responses from 354 participants.

The participants represent a broad cross-section of employers by number of employees, ranging from small businesses with under 50 employees to enterprises with 20,000 or more employees. Just over 54% of respondents represent organizations with 500 or more employees.

### Below is a quick overview of some of the key findings

**Key Finding #1:** *While the vast majority of organizations have performance management processes, few appear to be generating effective results.*

- Ninety percent of organizations have performance management processes
- However, just 30% said their performance management systems are effective or very effective at helping meet organizational goals
- Similarly, only 31% say their PM efforts are effective or very effective at employee development
- Even fewer reported effective PM outcomes in employee engagement and improving employee performance



**Key Finding #2:** *Most managers lack honed skills in the area of performance management, and this may be partly a case of inadequate training and top-down cynicism about the process.*

- Just 33% of HR professionals say most managers are satisfied with their existing performance management system
- Only 27% of HR professionals agree to a high or very high extent that managers in their organizations are skilled at performance management
- Fewer than 40% say that managers have been sufficiently trained in PM
- More senior leaders view PM as a necessary evil than believe it is crucial to their businesses

**Key Finding #3:** *In most organizations, performance management processes include basic features such as feedback to employees, but few of those processes accurately portray employee performance.*

- Around 80% of HR professionals say their processes include managerial feedback and a discussion of goals
- However, a meager 34% say their PM processes “accurately portray employee performance,” and just 39% say it is easy to use

**Key Finding #4:** *Most organizations have positive and forward-looking goals for their performance review process.*

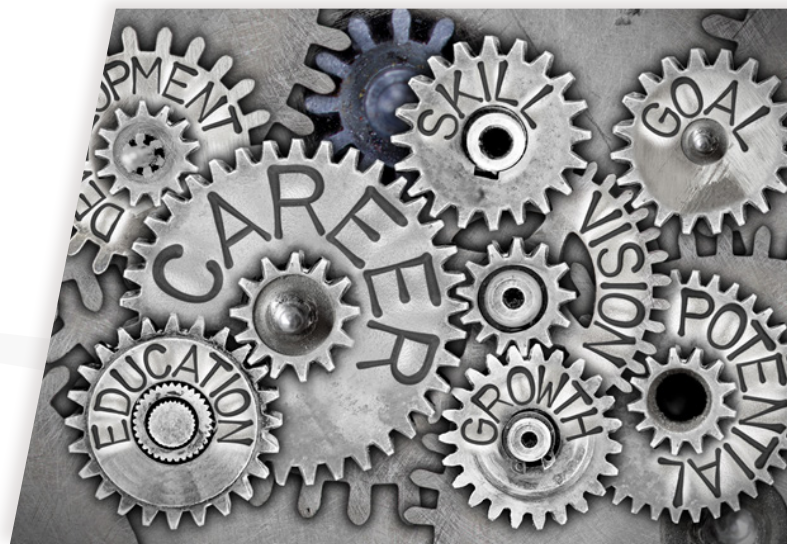
- Over two-thirds of HR professionals (68%) say helping employees learn and grow is a goal
- Most (66%) say helping their organizations improve overall performance is a goal of performance reviews
- Two-thirds also say that boosting the communication between managers and employees is an important goal

**Key Finding #5:** *On average, most organizations use technology for the purpose of performance management, with larger organizations being much more likely to use them.*

- Whereas 85% of large firms (1,000+ employees) use technology for PM, the same is true for only 59% of mid-sized (100 to 999 employees) and just 35% of firms with 99 or fewer employees
- Most organizations that use PM technologies leverage the tools bundled in their HRIS or other system, whereas only about a quarter use point solution technology
- By far the most common capability of these systems is the ability to facilitate the employee performance review or appraisal process

**Key Finding #6:** *Organizations that are better at performance management are more likely than others to:*

- state that a goal of performance review is to help employees learn and grow
- conduct performance appraisals more frequently
- say their managers are satisfied with their PM system
- have managers who are more skilled and better trained at PM

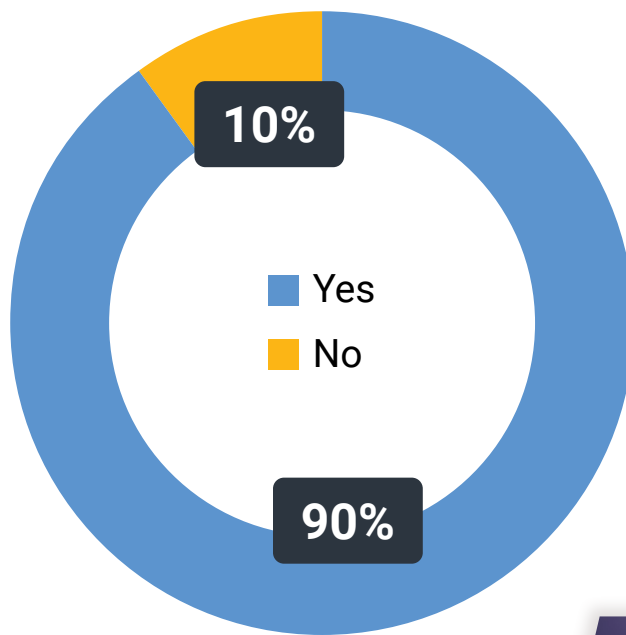


## How common and effective is performance management today?

**Finding: 90% of organizations have performance management processes**

Performance management is not universal, but it is pretty close. Nine out of every 10 organizations have PM processes. Organizations of all sizes tend to have performance management processes, though larger organizations are slightly more likely to have them.

**Survey Question:** Does your organization have a performance management process?



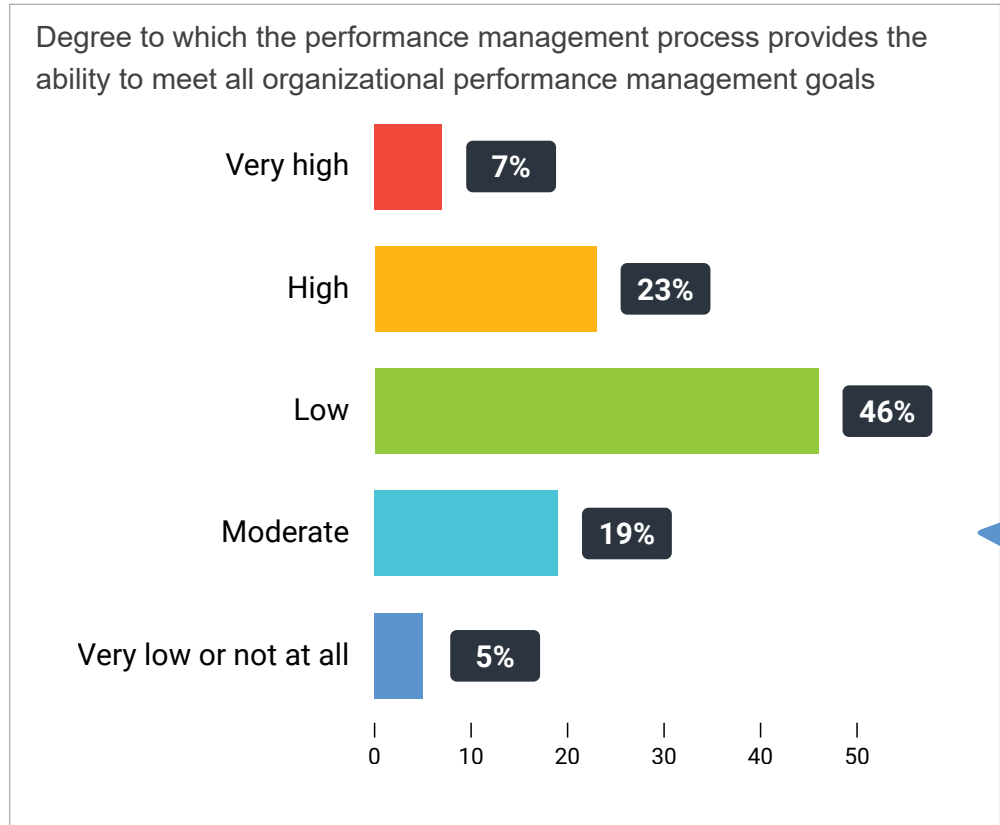
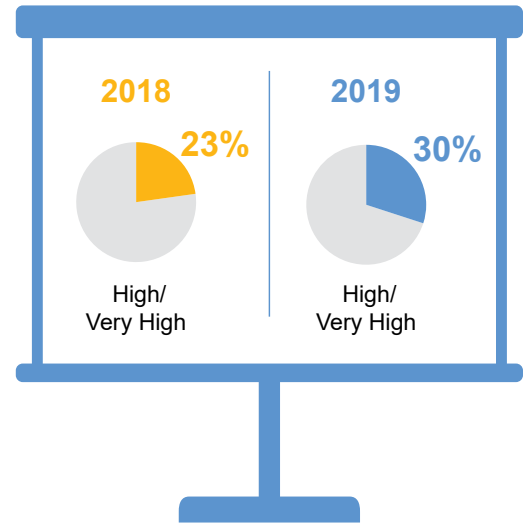
Performance management remains a mainstream talent-management practice



**Finding: Not many organizations are very good at performance management, but there are signs of improvement**

Only 30% of HR professionals say their PM process results in the organization achieving all of its performance goals to a high or very high extent. That's not great, but there is some good news. This represents a seven percentage point increase over last year, when only 23% rated their effectiveness at achieving organizational goals as high or very high.

There was improvement on the opposite end of responses, too. In this year's survey, only 5% rate their organization's ability to meet all PM goals as very low, compared to 15% in 2018. There is no way to know whether this is a trend or just a statistical blip, but it is heartening.

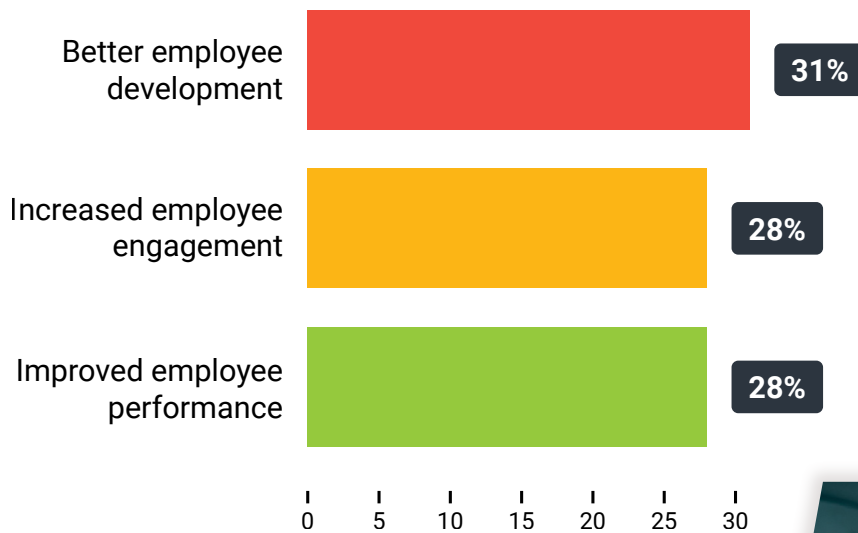


About three-quarters say PM helps their organization meet all performance goals to a moderate degree or more

**Finding: Relatively few say their PM processes excel at improving employee development, employee engagement or improved employee performance**

Performance management as a core HR function holds the potential to influence an organization and employees in a variety of areas. The primary goal of PM is usually to improve employee and organizational performance. However, only 28% say their PM processes are effective at improving employee performance to a high or very high extent. A similar ratio says that their PM processes improve employee engagement. Slightly more (31%) say PM leads to better employee development to a high or very high extent.

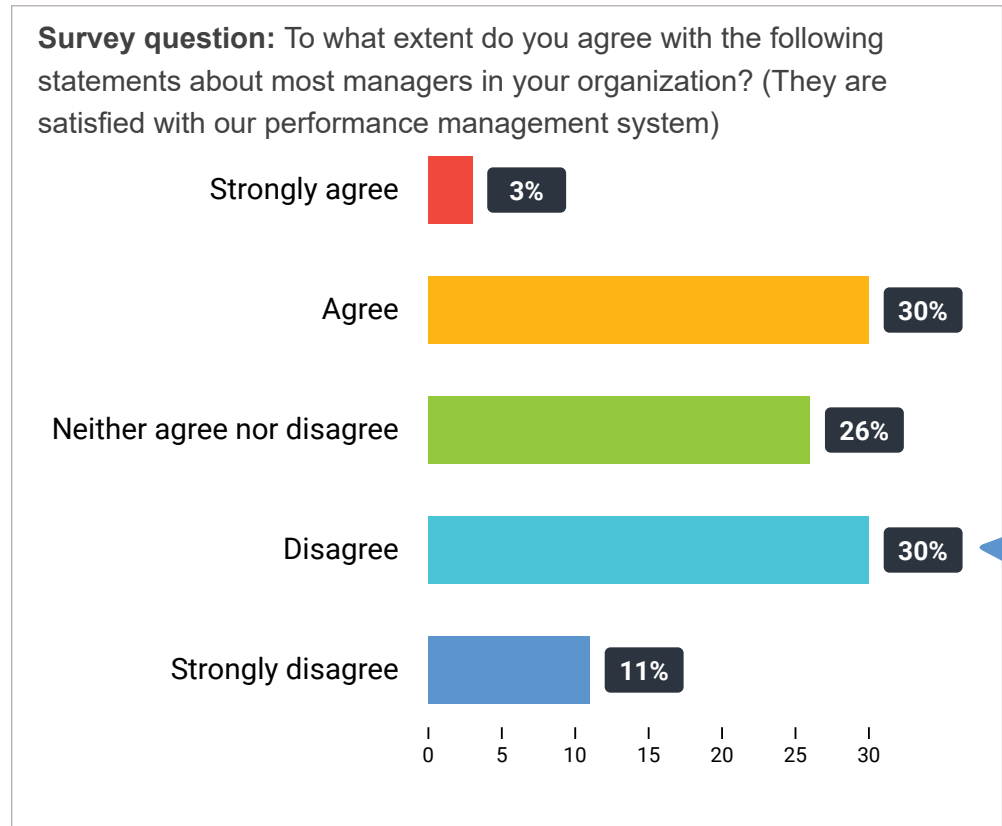
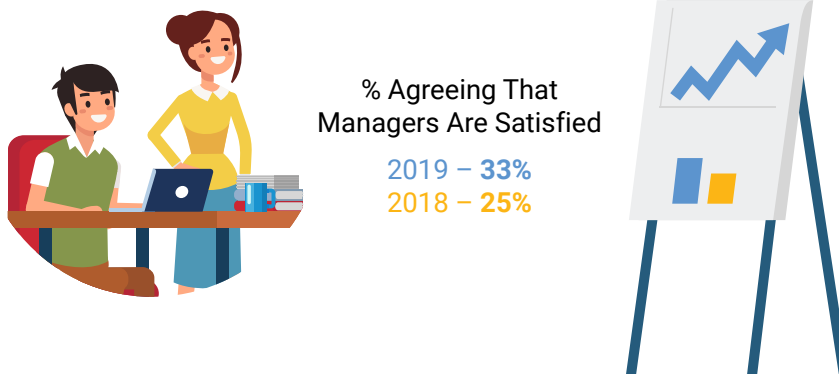
**Survey question:** To what degree does your organization's performance management process result in the following? [% Very High and High]





**Finding: Only a third of HR professionals say managers are satisfied with PM systems**

A performance management system seems more likely to succeed if managers support the system. Therefore, it's probably a bad sign that only 33% of HR practitioners agree that managers are satisfied with the current system. That said, even this low ratio represents an improvement from the 2018 finding.



More respondents disagree than agree that managers are satisfied with PM

### Finding: Most HR professionals think that managers are not very skilled at performance management

Why don't more organizations have high-quality performance management processes? Perhaps because management lacks the skills to make those processes work. Just 27% of respondents agree or strongly agree that their managers are skilled at performance management.

Part of the blame may be HR's. After all, only 39% of participating HR professionals agree or strongly agree that their managers are adequately trained at performance management. It's hard to fault managers for their lack of skill when they haven't been afforded the opportunity to learn the skills they need.

The only good news is that the 27% figure is up from 21% in 2018.



% of Managers Viewed as Skilled at PM

2019 – 27%  
2018 – 21%



**Survey question:** To what extent do you agree with the following statements about most managers in your organization? [% Strongly Agree or Agree only]



Only 27% of HR professionals consider their managers to be skilled at PM



**Finding: More top leaders see PM as a necessary evil than as crucial to overall business performance**

Very few strategic level initiatives or programs are successful without visible and meaningful support from senior leaders. Unfortunately, HR professionals are more likely to say that senior leaders view PM as a “necessary evil” than as crucial to the business: 26% to 17%. Another 12% view PM as a “waste of time.”

In an effort to offer some balance, we provided participants a few options that would indicate their senior leaders view PM as delivering something positive. None of the positive options garnered more than 15% of the responses.

- An aid to employee development
- Means to improve engagement or retention
- Effective way to make employee decisions

We think it’s likely that this is another reason that PM processes are considered mediocre or worse in so many organizations.



## What are the goals and features of performance management?

Performance management processes, while nearly universally adopted, tend to vary from organization to organization. Important differences stem from corporate cultures, workplace needs, industries, etc. Nonetheless, this study shows that there are certain commonalities.

### Finding: Most PM processes include goal setting and feedback, while less than half are easy to use or understand

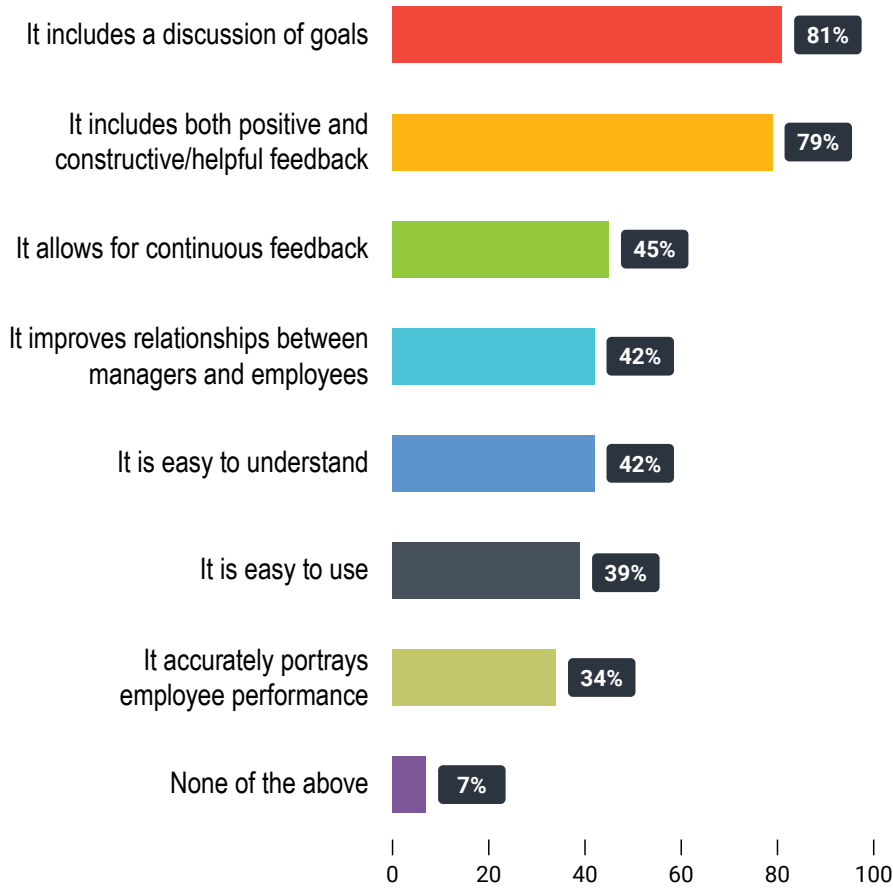
This study shows that most PM processes suffer from certain shortcomings. As the graph below illustrates, only a minority of participants describe their performance management features as “easy to understand” (42%) and “easy to use” (39%). This helps explain the low levels of satisfaction among managers.

The PM features mentioned most frequently are the discussion of goals (81%) and opportunities for both positive and corrective feedback (79%). They are at the heart of today’s performance management processes.

Perhaps the most disturbing finding is that only about a third of HR professionals believe that the performance management system in their organizations “accurately portrays employee performance.” What is performance management if it’s not providing a fair and accurate picture of employee performance?



**Survey question:** Which of the following statements are features of your organization's performance management process? (select all that apply)



Only about a third believe their PM processes accurately portray employee performance

### Finding: The most prevalent goals for performance reviews are positive ones

Maybe some PM systems do not accurately portray performance because accurately gauging performance is not among their top goals. We asked HR professionals to identify the goals for their performance review process, and three positive goals emerged as dominating the responses.

Over two-thirds (68%) say helping employees learn and grow is a performance review goal. The other two most widely cited goals are the desire to “help the company improve overall performance” and “to boost communication between employees and managers,” both cited by 66% of HR professionals.

We applaud these goals as being positive rather than punitive. However, we must read this data in conjunction with other findings in the report. For instance, performance management in general isn't very effective at improving organizational or employee performance, and relatively few managers are good at having performance conversations. So, while employee learning and growth, communication and organizational performance are terrific goals, many organizations are failing to meet them.



**Survey question:** Which of the following describes your organization's goals for conducting performance reviews? (select all that apply)



Helping employees learn and grow is the most widely cited goal of performance management



## What performance management metrics are used?

### Finding: Manager ratings remain the dominant metric used to measure employee performance

This study identifies a conundrum. Although it indicates that managers are not very good at or satisfied with performance management in most organizations, companies nonetheless turn to these very same managers to provide the primary means of measuring the performance of employees.

Some sources criticize manager ratings as having multiple drawbacks,<sup>1</sup> such as:

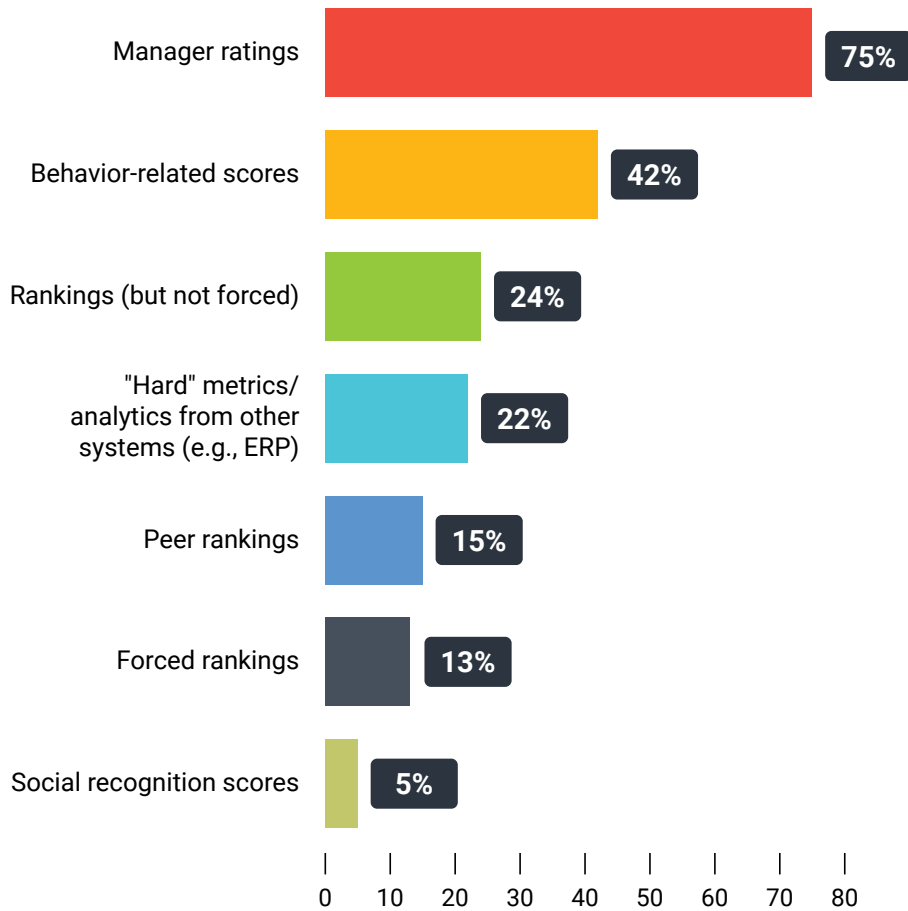
- they are not typically data-driven
- formal performance reviews tend to be one-sided conversations
- they frequently impede rather than promote employee engagement and performance

Our study supports the argument that few organizations make use of objective data, with only 22% saying they use “hard” metrics/analytics to measure employee performance. In a world in which data-driven decisions are largely viewed as a best practice,<sup>2</sup> the lack of data in the performance management process looks like an area for future improvement. On the other hand, it is often difficult to tease out individual performance data in today’s team-based organizations.

<sup>1</sup> Roterberg, Z. The 6 major problems with annual performance reviews. Retrieved on July 10, 2019.

<sup>2</sup> Durcevic, S. (2019, April 16) Why data driven decision making is your path to business success. *Business Intelligence*. Retrieved on July 10, 2019.

**Survey question:** What types of metrics are incorporated into your performance management process? (select all that apply)



**Finding: Few organizations hold their managers accountable for performance management beyond procedural elements**

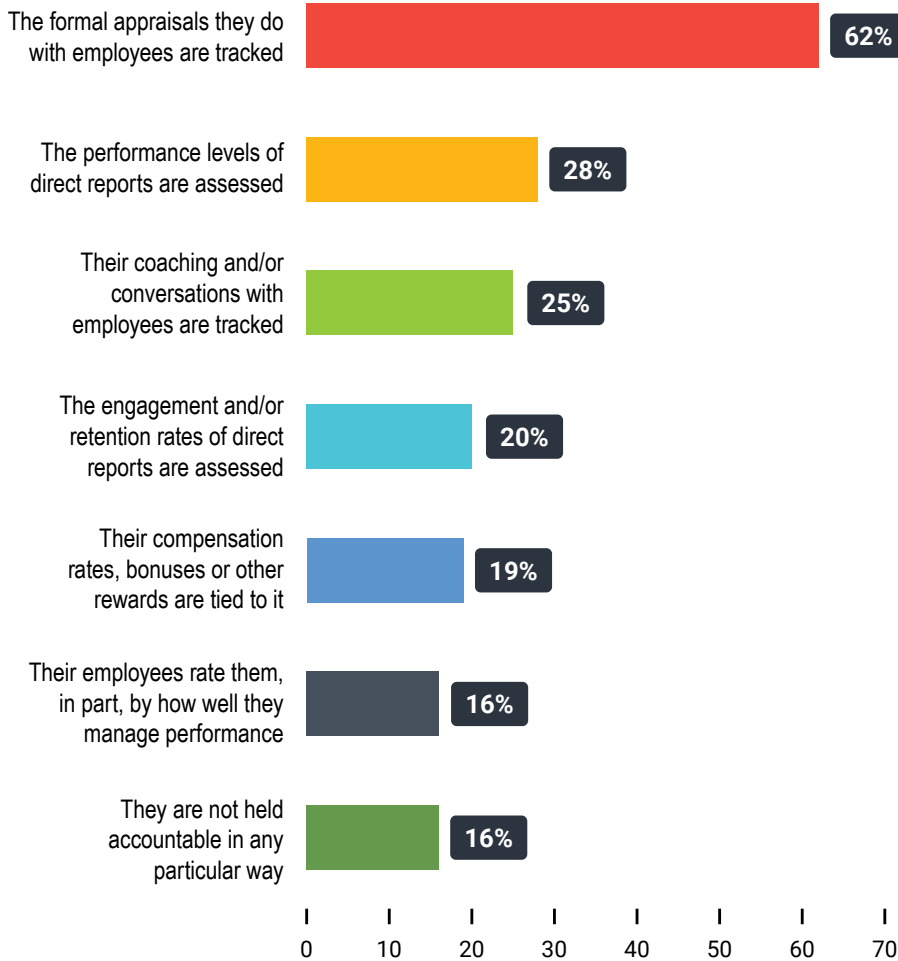
Only 16% of participants say they do *not* hold their managers accountable for performance management. On its face, this is an encouraging finding. After all, managers are on the front lines of performance management. Finding ways to hold them accountable seems logical.

However, by far the most frequently cited (62%) method of holding managers accountable is tracking formal appraisals of employees. Of course, simply tracking whether formal appraisals are done does not tell organizations whether appraisals are being done well. In some cases, perhaps “tracking” includes gauging the quality of those appraisals, which would be a step up.

However, few organizations (28%) take the next step of holding managers accountable by assessing the actual performance of their direct reports. This is more directly tied to the performance management capabilities of managers than measuring the frequency of reviews, so why don't more organizations do this? This is possibly because individual performance can be difficult to measure objectively. We will examine this question more thoroughly in our discussion of key performance indicators.



**Survey question:** How do you hold managers accountable for doing performance management? (check all that apply)



Only 16% of organizations do not hold managers accountable for performance management

## How frequent are performance management events?

Some thought leaders and HR professionals argue that annual performance reviews are not only useless but actually harmful.<sup>3</sup> Conversely, some also believe that continuous feedback and communication are more conducive to improving organizational performance in today's workplace. So, what are most organizations doing in this area?

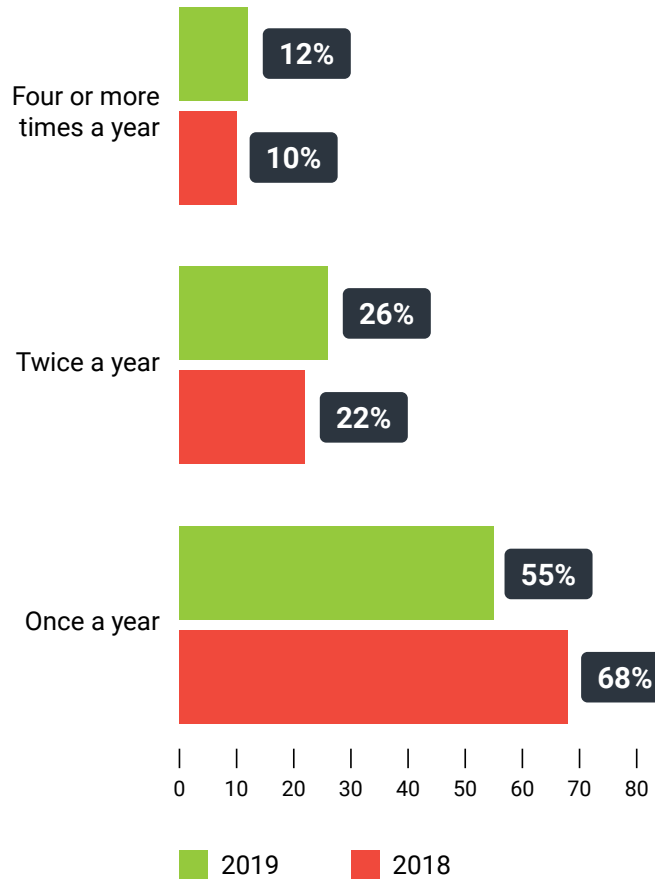
### Finding: Few organizations (12%) have formal appraisals of performance at least four times a year

Since manager rankings dominate performance management metrics, it makes sense to explore how managers determine rankings. Most organizations continue to work within the traditional "annual performance review" structure, with 55% of participants confirming the one-time-per-year process between managers and employees. However, a total of 38% now conduct formal reviews at least twice a year, and 12% formally review performance four times a year or more. As the chart below illustrates, we saw a year-over-year movement towards more frequent formal performance appraisals. In 2018, 32% conducted reviews two times or more, and in 2019 the ratio rose to 38%.

We also see a corresponding drop from 68% to 55% of the organizations conducting just a single formal performance appraisal.

<sup>3</sup> Ryan, L. (2018, January 14). Performance reviews are pointless and insulting -- so why do they still exist? *Forbes*. Retrieved from <https://www.forbes.com/sites/lizryan/2018/01/14/performance-reviews-are-pointless-and-insulting-so-why-do-they-still-exist/>

Frequency of formal reviews/appraisals of employee performance



Managers conduct formal appraisals twice a year or more in 38% of organizations according to this year's data

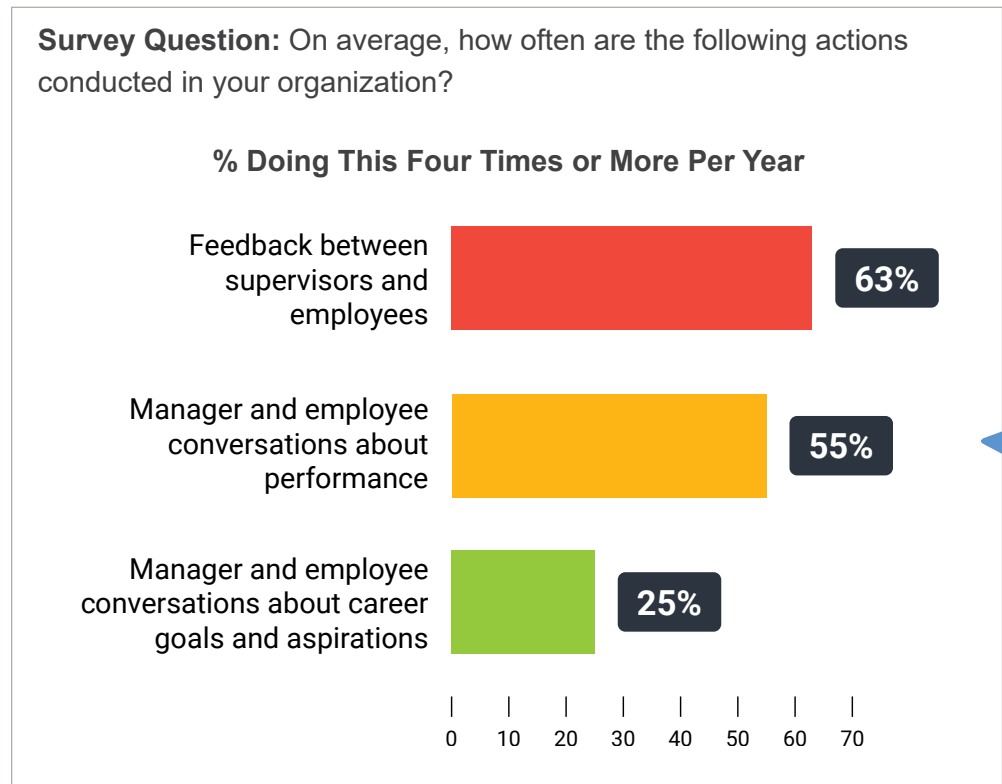


**Finding: Informal interactions and conversations between managers and employees about performance are relatively frequent, with most engaging in these four or more times a year**

Formal performance reviews are often time consuming and difficult to manage. One tactic is to encourage managers to have more frequent but less formal conversations with employees about performance. In fact, 63% of supervisors and employees provide feedback more than four times per year, and 55% of respondents say conversations specifically about performance occur four or more times per year.

The conversation that occurs *less* frequently than the others is the one between managers and employees about career goals and aspirations. This occurs four or more times per year in just 25% of responding companies.

Although formal appraisals still dominate the performance management landscape, the levels of frequent “real-time” feedback might represent a powerful mechanism for improving performance and performance management. As we will show later, managers in high performing PM organizations tend to engage more frequently with employees.



Conversations about performance are relatively frequent occurrences

## What role does technology play in performance management?

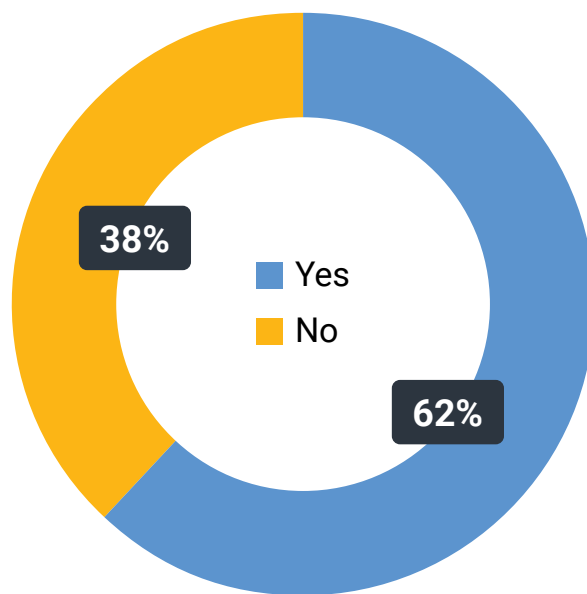
**Finding: More than three out of five organizations employ technology tools in their performance management processes**

A majority (62%) use technology to facilitate performance management, but this is an area where the size of the organization matters. In organizations with 1,000 or more employees, 85% use PM technology tools. In contrast, only 59% of organizations with 100 to 999 employees use PM technology tools, and that ratio drops to 35% among organizations with 99 or fewer employees.



Generally speaking, technologies can make performance management easier and more standardized for large organizations, which may otherwise have a difficult time tracking and facilitating the process for 1,000 or more employees. Larger organizations may also have greater resources to apply to such technology and greater incentives due to economies of scale.

**Survey question:** Does your organization use technology for the purpose of performance management?

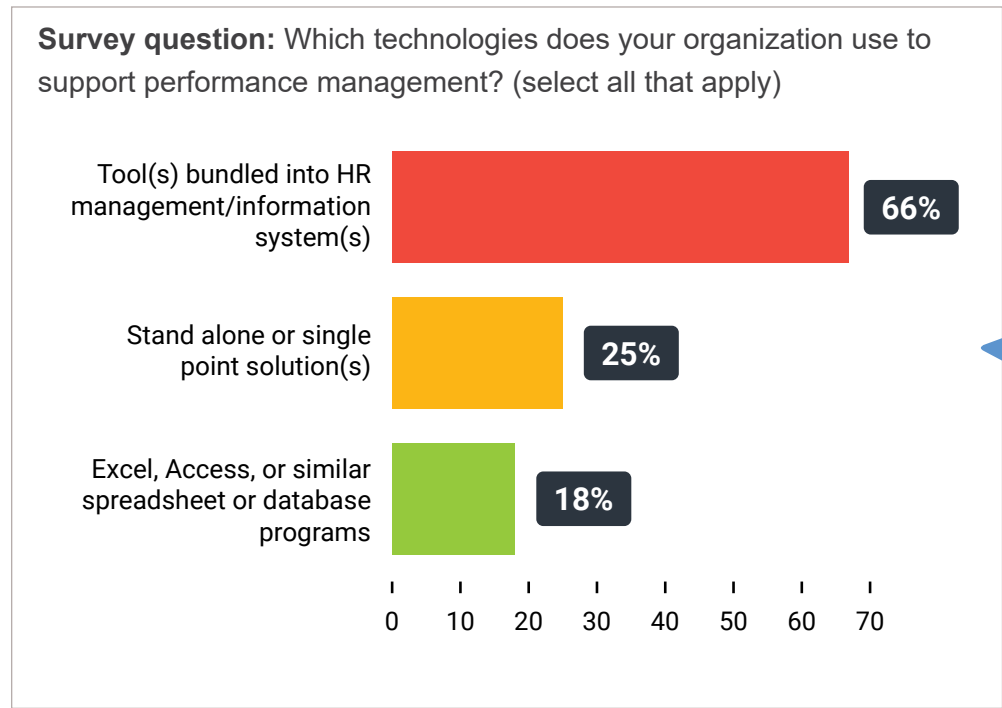




**Finding: Bundled PM technologies are most frequently used**

As the HR technology industry continues to evolve, HR professionals must often decide whether to use single point solutions, bundled solutions or some combination of both for the purposes of performance management. Some HR professionals believe that single point solutions give them the best chance of using “best of breed” technologies, whereas others prefer integrated systems.

For now, at least, bundled solutions are carrying the day. Two-thirds (66%) of the respondents (that use some form of PM technology) leverage tools bundled into some broader HR technology such as HRIS or HRM solutions. Only 25% choose to use stand alone or single point solutions. Meanwhile, almost one in five (18%) continue to use database programs such as Excel or Access to manage PM.



**One quarter of HR professionals say their organizations use stand-alone PM tools**

### Finding: PM technology generally supports the performance review process

Performance appraisals dominate the PM process in most organizations, so it follows that PM technology is also likely to support and facilitate the formal performance review process. Nearly three-in-four (72%) of organizations with PM technology use their tools for exactly that purpose.

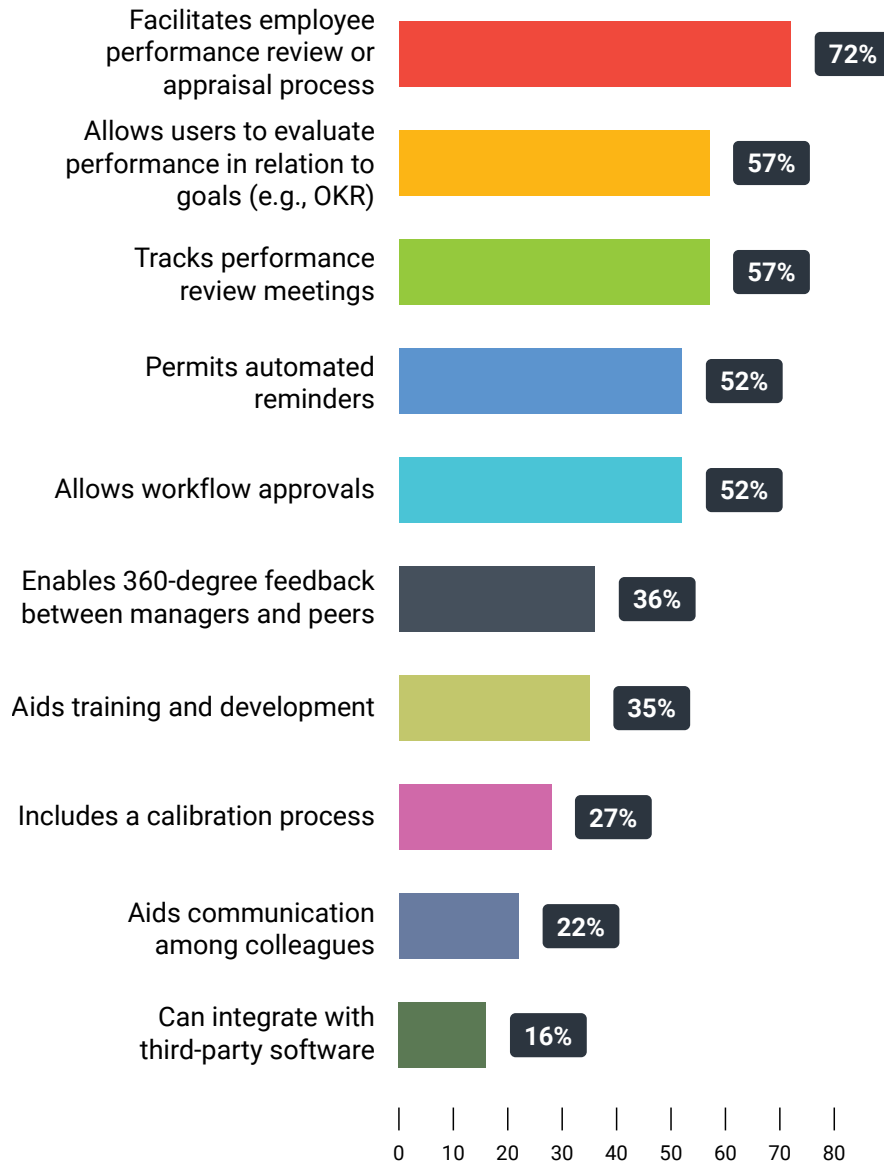
A majority of systems (57%) also allow users to “evaluate performance in relation to goals.” This strikes us as an important function, both for the purpose of employee development and for tracking employee performance in useful ways.

On the other hand, today’s systems seem to be failing on multiple levels. As we noted previously, the most broadly held goal for performance management is to help employees “learn and grow.” The most obvious HR function for achieving this is learning and development (L&D), which is a reasonable argument for at least partially integrating L&D and PM technologies. Yet, only 35% of HR professionals say their PM technology “aids employee training and development.” Even fewer (22%) aid communication among colleagues.

Although PM technology holds great promise for helping HR to boost employee and overall organizational performance improvement, most current systems seem primarily rooted in the procedural aspects of PM.



**Survey question:** Which of the following capabilities does your performance management technology system(s) include? (select all that apply)



Very few systems integrate with third-party software

### Finding: Some systems permit note-taking and L&D tracking

We followed up with HR professionals who said that their PM systems aid communication among colleagues and/or aids training and development (see previous graph).

Among HR professionals who say their systems aid communication, most (87%) indicate that their systems permit managers to add notes at any time, and two-thirds (66%) say employees are also permitted to add notes any time. Many (45%) reveal that their systems allow for recognition of employee achievements.

Among HR professionals whose PM systems aid L&D, over two-thirds (68%) have systems that track L&D achievements, while 56% say their system makes L&D suggestions.

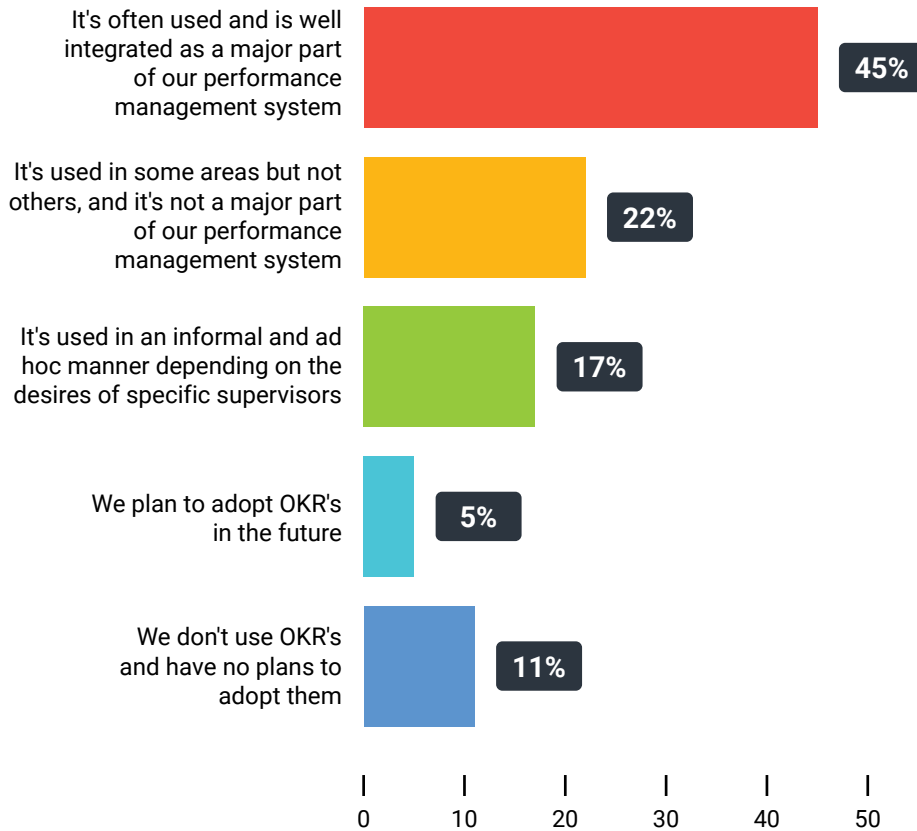
Based on the fact that so many respondents believe the goals of performance management are to increase employee development and to boost communication, we believe these two subsets of technology users are more likely to achieve those goals.

### Finding: Less than half have goals and objectives fully integrated into their PM processes

We also looked at the subset of PM technology users who allow users to evaluate performance in relation to goals. These represent only about 35% of respondents to the survey. Our follow up question specifically focused on Objective and Key Results, or OKR. For the purpose of this study, we defined OKR as “a management strategy for goal setting within organizations to achieve objectives through specific and measurable actions.”

Among those organizations that evaluate employee performance in relation to goals, most (89%) use OKR to some extent or plan to adopt it. Many (45%) state that OKR is “often used and well-integrated as a major part of our performance management system.” Although these are subsets, this data does suggest that OKR strategies are utilized by a respectable percentage of today’s PM technology users.

**Survey question:** To what degree does your organization use the OKR approach for the purpose of increasing performance?



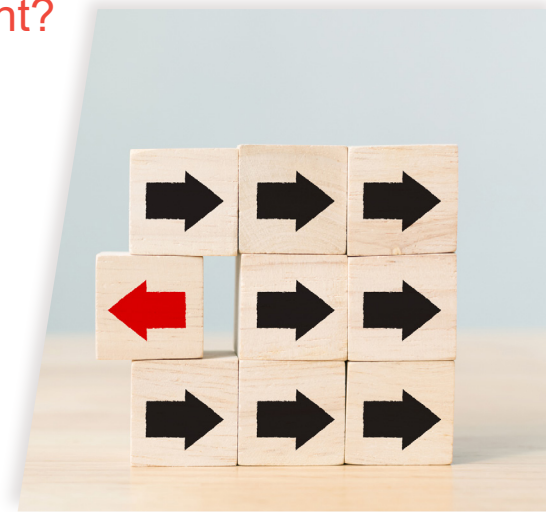
Only 11% make no use of OKR's and have no plans to do so in the future



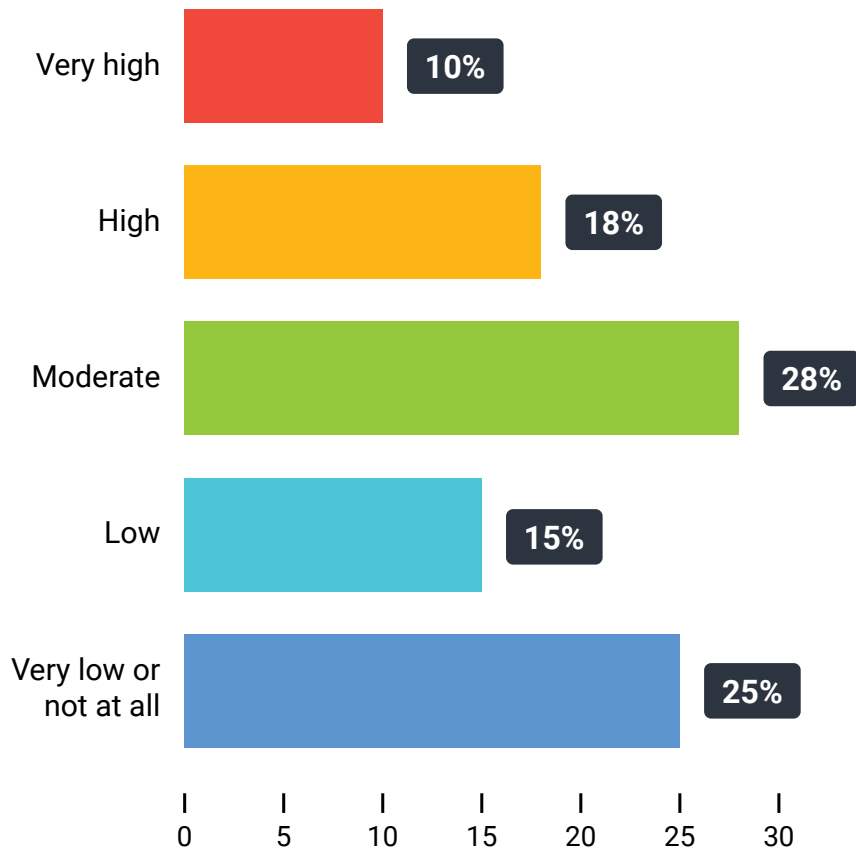
## What's changing in performance management?

**Finding:** Most HR professionals say their performance management systems have experienced at least moderate change in the last two years

Has performance management been changing over the last two years? In many ways, yes. Over a quarter (28%) of HR professionals say their organizations have experienced a high or very high degree of change, and another 28% say they've experienced moderate change. Of course, that still leaves a large portion that report there's been little to no change.



**Survey question:** To what degree has your organization's performance management system changed over the last two years?



Forty percent say their performance management systems changed little if at all over the last two years

**Finding: Change in performance management is expected to increase in the next two years**

In contrast to the 28% who described the extent of their PM changes as high or very high over the last two years, 43% expect a high or very high degree of change in the *next* two years. Of course, some may be overestimating the future rate of change, but this does indicate that many HR professionals see this as an area ripe for change in the near future.

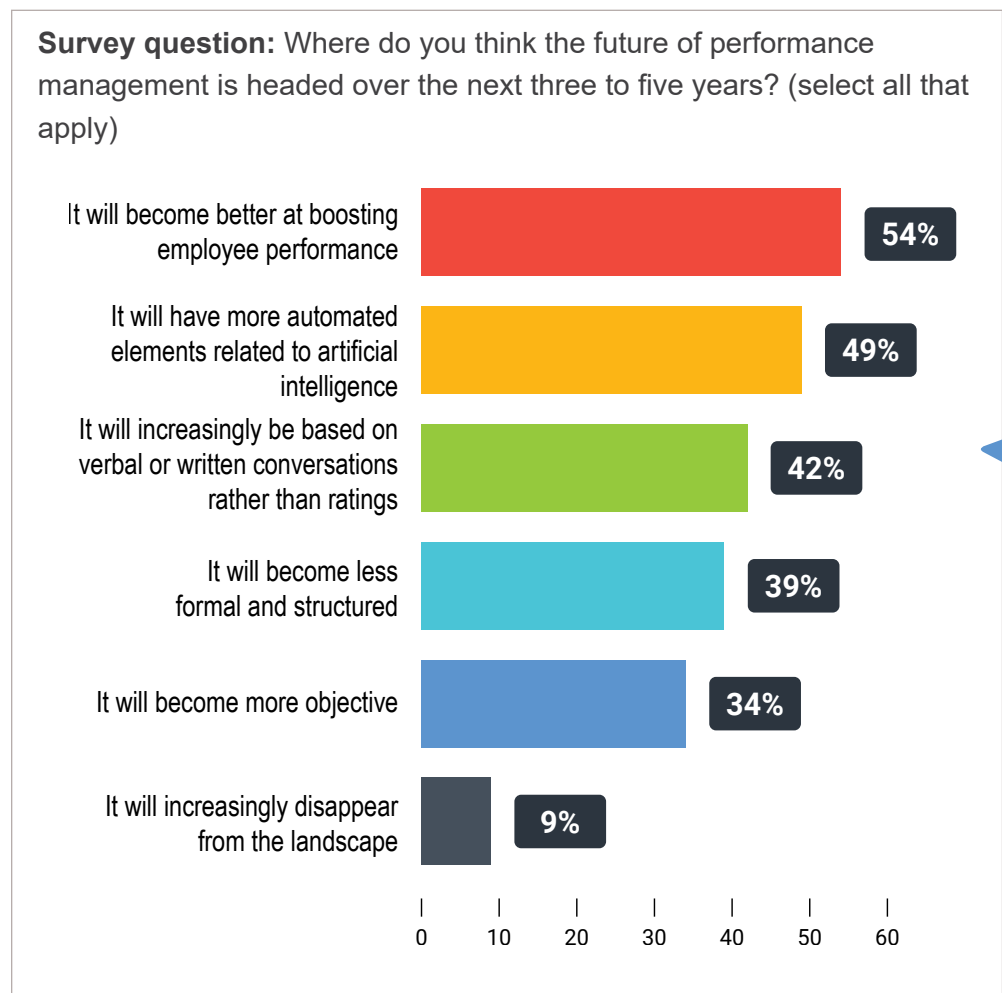


Only 11% expect their performance management systems to have very low levels of change or no change at all in the next two years

**Finding: Many HR professionals see improvements on the horizon**

This study indicates that performance management processes continue to suffer from a variety of flaws and hindrances, but most participants are not ready to give up on PM. In fact, only 9% expect it to disappear from the landscape.

By comparison, over half (54%) say PM will get better at boosting employee performance, and almost half (49%) foresee PM as having more automated elements related to artificial intelligence.



**PM might get better at boosting performance while becoming less formal and increasingly based on conversations rather than ratings**



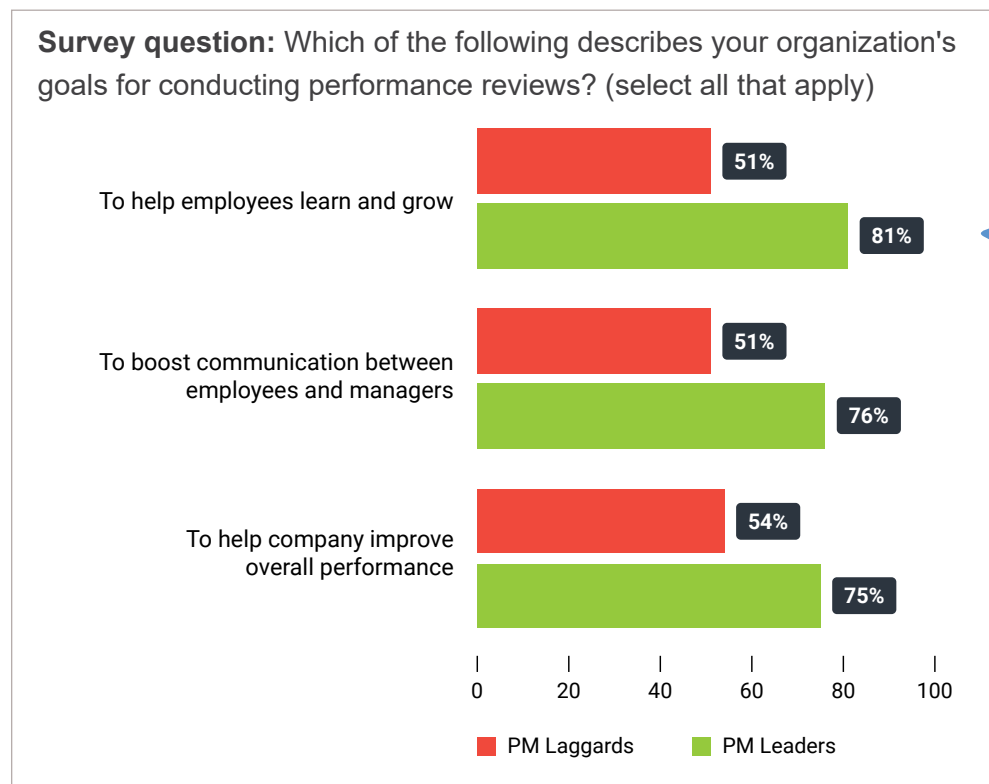
## What do the more successful HR teams do differently?

To gain greater insights into possible best practices, we divided the sample into two cohorts:

- **PM Leaders**, who answered “very high” or “high” when asked about the degree to which their PM processes have the ability to meet organizational performance management goals
- **PM Laggards**, who answered “low” or “very low or not at all” to the same question

### Finding: The performance management goals of PM Leaders are more likely to focus on employee development and communication

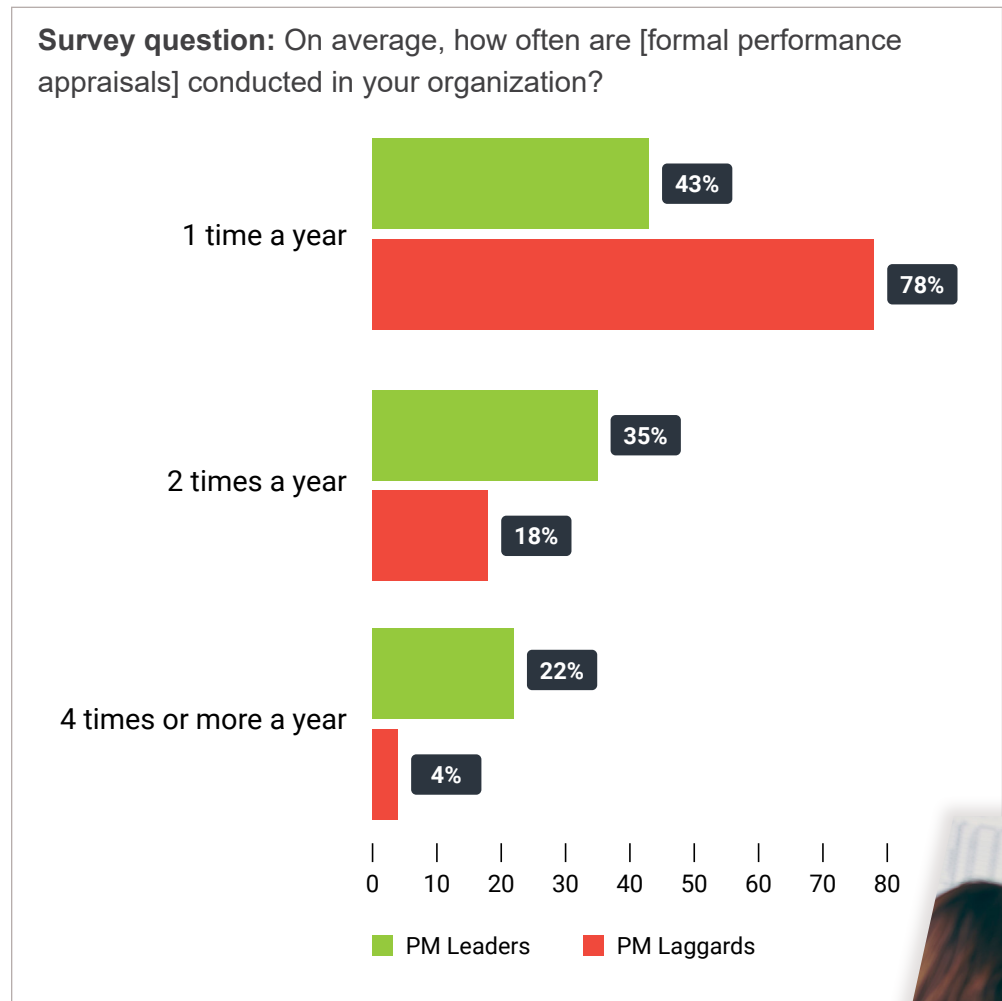
PM Leaders are more likely to place emphasis on employee learning, manager/employee communication and improving overall company performance.



Eighty-one percent of PM Leaders say helping employees learn and grow is a goal of their review process

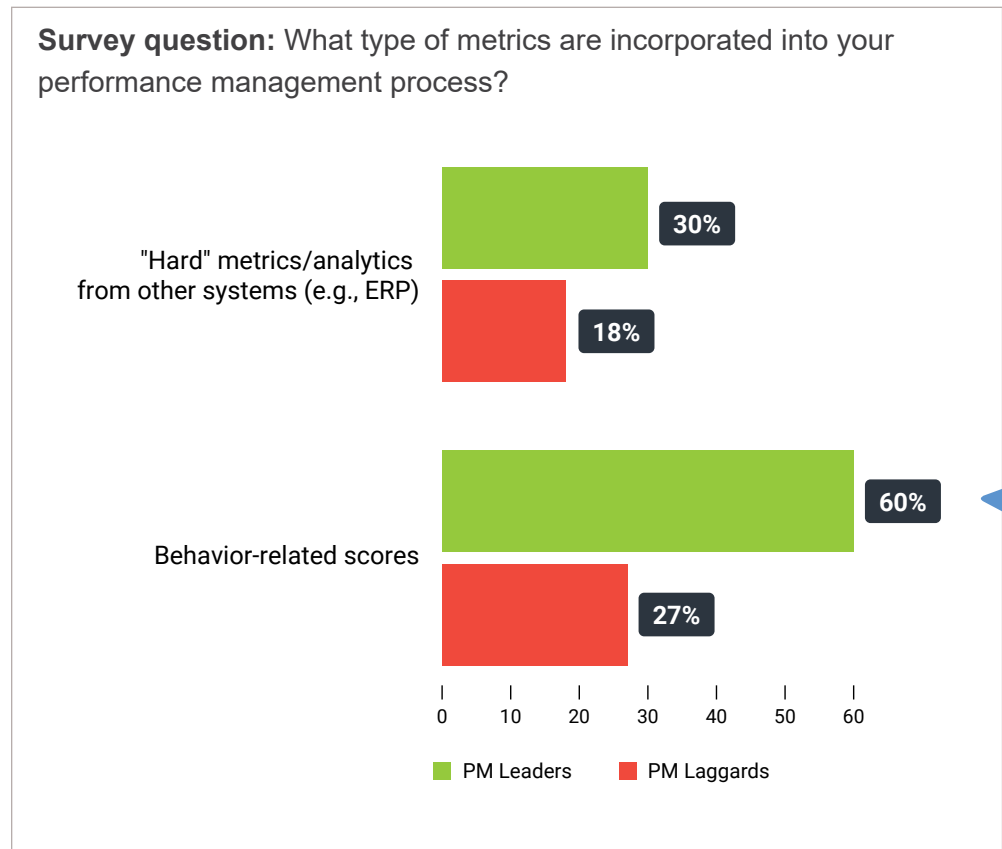
**Finding: PM Leaders tend to review employee performance more frequently than PM Laggards**

PM Leaders seem to engage their employees in conversations and reviews of performance more frequently. In fact, more than one-in-five of PM Leaders conducts formal appraisals four times or more a year, compared to just 4% of the PM Laggards. Meanwhile, PM Laggards are more likely to say they conduct performance reviews just once a year.



### Finding: PM Leaders are more likely to use behavior-related metrics

An interesting distinction between the PM Leaders and PM Laggards involves the metrics used in their PM process. The leaders are more likely to use “hard” data, and they are far more likely to use behavior-related scores to evaluate performance. Perhaps these metrics are viewed as making the PM process fairer and more objective.

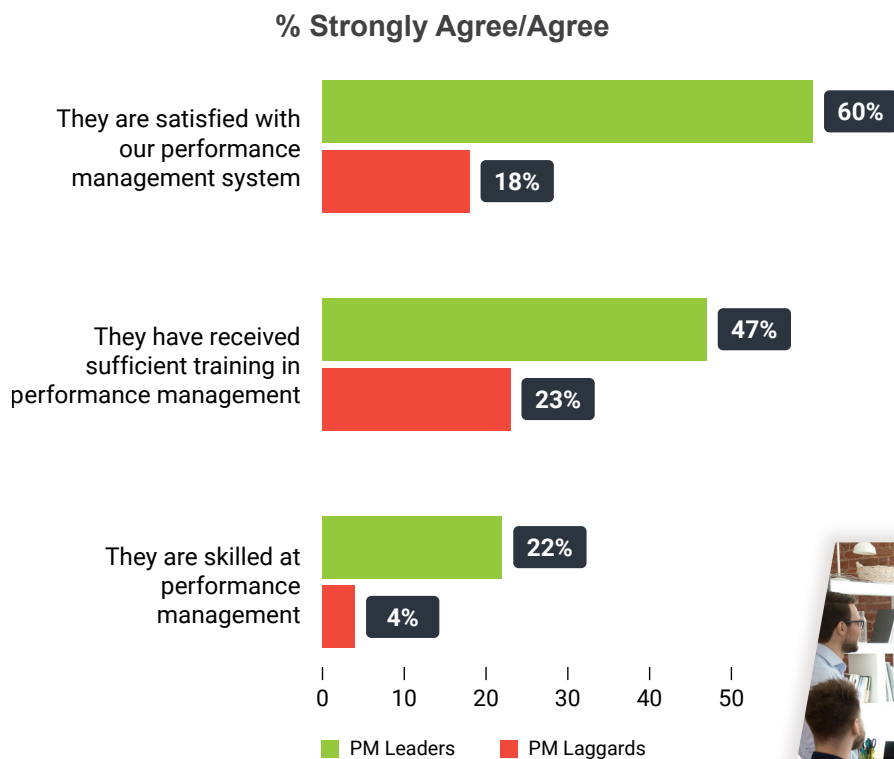


**PM Leaders are more than twice as likely to use behavior-related scores in performance management systems**

**Finding: The managers in PM Leaders are more apt to be better trained and have higher skills**

High performing organizations in just about any business discipline are more likely to have better managers. Performance management is no different. Managers among our PM Leaders are viewed as skilled at performance management at more than five times the rate as in PM Laggards – 22% to 4%. And PM Leaders are twice as likely to say their managers are sufficiently trained in this area, 47% to 23%. These higher skill levels and better training probably contribute to higher levels of satisfaction with performance management – 60% among PM Leaders and 18% among PM Laggards.

**Survey question:** To what extent do you agree with the following statements about most managers in your organization?

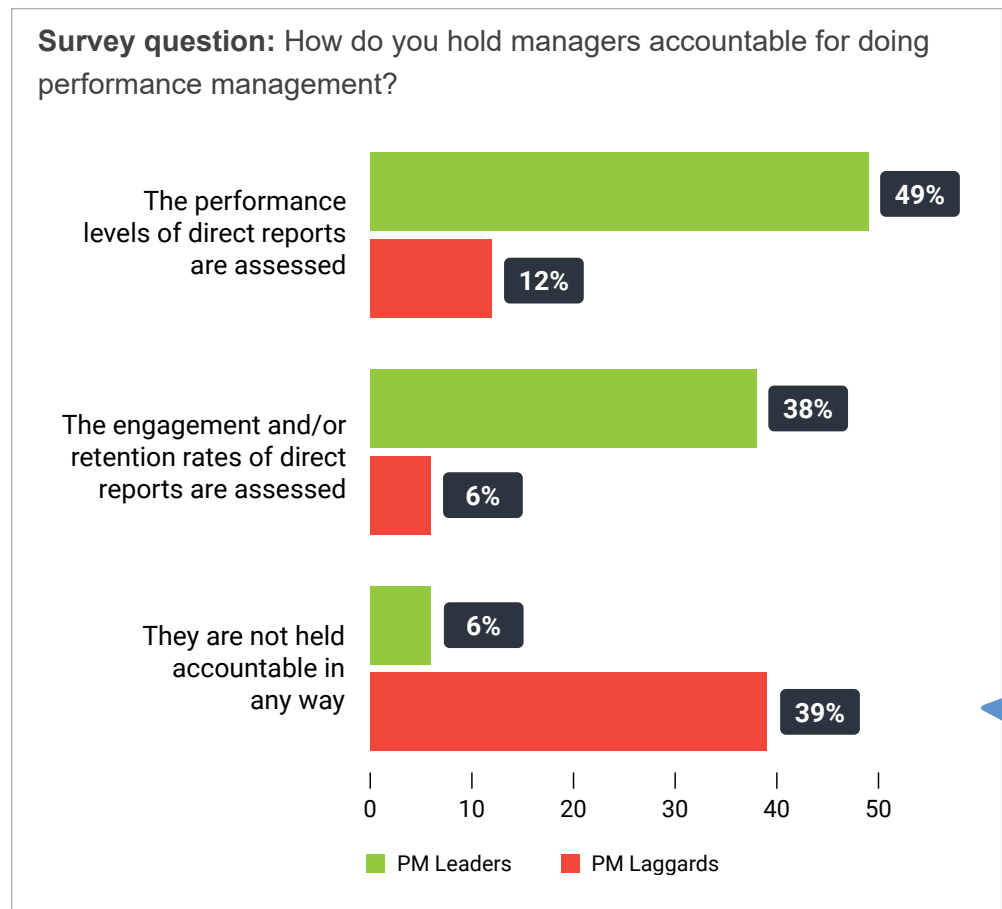


The managers in PM Leader organizations are more likely to be satisfied with PM



**Finding: Managers among PM Leader organizations are held more accountable**

In PM Leader organizations, managers are more likely to be accountable through multiple measures. When managers are held accountable and that accountability is measured by data that is verifiable, the entire organization appears to benefit in regard to overall performance.



Thirty-nine percent of PM Laggards do not hold their managers accountable for performance management



## Key Takeaways

What key lessons can we learn from this research? Below are some suggested tactics and strategies:

1

**Work with leaders to stake out a position on performance management.** In many organizations, performance management doesn't work very well—in which case it should either be de-emphasized or it should be improved. Leaders need to decide which route they want to take. In organizations where it does work well, leaders are likely to see it as crucial to business success.

2

**Train managers in performance management.** One of the most substantial gaps in many organizations' training and development programs is training in management skills for managers and supervisors. A crucial management competency is performance management. The data in this report illustrates just how important having skilled and trained managers can be in influencing the effectiveness of performance management systems. An organization can have a great design, superb technology and great processes in place. But if the managers lack PM skills and are not adequately trained, everything comes unglued.

3

**Consider more frequent performance and career conversations.** The recent flurry of opinions arguing that performance management should be an ongoing process finds support in this study. Of course, if the organization's current appraisal and feedback methods are ineffective or even counterproductive, then just increasing the frequency will likely be a mistake. This study suggests that both quality and quantity are needed.

4

**Consider holding managers more accountable.** Tracking whether or not performance appraisals occur is probably insufficient. Consider holding managers more accountable for the performance and skill levels of their direct reports, and measure important areas such as retention and turnover. Reward managers whose direct reports are prepared and are worthy of promotion. Such measures get closer to the core of performance management – improving the skills and performance of employees. If more frequent conversations are a part of the strategy, then make sure there is some accountability for making it happen. Also consider allowing employees to rate managers in terms of how well they manage performance.

5

**Add more verifiable data to the performance management process.** Some subjectivity may be inevitable, but balance it with more objective criteria. Managers, even highly skilled and well-trained managers, are susceptible to a range of unconscious biases creeping into their employee evaluations. For example, recent events tend to overshadow accomplishments from months before. Manager reviews can also be one-sided. So, look for behavior-based and verifiable ways to evaluate employee and manager performance. For instance, use measurable goals as a performance success guide. Consider leveraging the Objective and Key Results strategy in certain areas.

6

**Keep PM technology up-to-date.** Investigate the latest trends and features. Are there features that facilitate better feedback among employees and their supervisors? Do new systems allow for just-in-time employee recognition? Are there ways of connecting PM with L&D or career development? Also look for advances that leverage artificial intelligence and automation. Especially for mid-sized and larger firms, it doesn't make sense to waste time and effort with a manual administration of appraisal process when good SaaS technology can remove so much of the burden. Look for a system that best matches your organization's cultural and logistical needs.

7

**Engage senior leaders in your PM processes.** Most successful strategic initiatives have strong and visible support from senior leaders. Make sure your senior leaders understand key PM goals. They should be aware of how current and planned PM initiatives will make the organization perform better. Senior leaders often relate to financial results, so seek connections between PM programs and bottom-line results.

8

**Clarify and, perhaps, simplify PM goals.** While not universally true, strategic initiatives tend to be more successful when the goals for the initiatives are clear and easy to understand. Ensure that HR, managers and employees all share the same vision of the goals of performance management.

9

**Emphasize the positive, though don't ignore the need for constructive feedback.** Too often, PM just becomes an annual ritual that everyone dreads. But it can be used to help employees learn and grow in their careers. This does not mean that managers should avoid offering constructive feedback, however. It's also important for employees to know where and how they could perform better.

### About Reflektive

Reflektive is the first people management platform that helps employees and managers work better together. More than 500 forward-thinking companies trust Reflektive to modernize their approach to people management and improve business performance in the process. Reflektive's People Management Suite is composed of Performance, Engagement and People Intelligence solutions. The San Francisco-based company securely enables real-time feedback, recognition, goal management, performance reviews, check-ins, 1:1 meetings, engagement surveys and people analytics for customers of all sizes — including Allbirds, Blue Origin, Comcast, Healthgrades, Pinterest and Protective Life. Backed by Andreessen Horowitz, Lightspeed Venture Partners and TPG Growth, Reflektive has raised more than \$100 million to date and was ranked the 13th Fastest Growing Company in North America on Deloitte's 2018 Technology Fast 500™. For more information, please visit [www.reflektive.com](http://www.reflektive.com)

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