

# DID COVID-19 CHANGE THINK TANKS' ANNUAL STAFF ASSESSMENTS?

by Raymond J. Struyk

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#### About the series:

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# Introduction

Two recent developments may be having significant effects on the way think tanks are structuring their staff assessments. First, is the simplification of elaborate systems with more streamlined ones that emphasise more frequent, less formal feedback and discussions partially or fully taking their place. Second, while such changes were being undertaken or considered, explosive growth occurred in the amount of white-collar staff working remotely in response to the threat of workplace COVID-19 infections.

Before COVID-19, think tanks and other organisations with broadly similar missions were beginning to assess, and in some cases adopt elements of the ‘simplification paradigm.’ But my sense from investigating this phenomenon in 2019 is that while more frequent feedback was being adopted in some cases, supervisors were also devoting more effort to improving the quality of their performance analysis and their interaction with direct-reports.<sup>1</sup>

This article provides early information on adjustments made by a small sample of think tanks (broadly defined) in the course of their 2020 end-of-year staff assessments to provide early insights into what is happening. The four organisations are ones that I view as well-managed and that have generously served as the panel for my series of posts at On Think Tanks on management topics:<sup>2</sup>

- The Urban Institute, a 50-year-old think tank with a staff nearing 800 located in Washington, DC. It is focused substantially on social policy issues and was created as part of the national government’s response to violent urban demonstrations in the 1960s; it became a fully independent private entity in 1978.
- The Institute for Urban Economics, located in Moscow, Russia is a 25-year-old think tank created in 1995 about four years after the fall of the Soviet Union, with a current staff of around 35. Much of the work on developing management policies and procedures was undertaken when it had a staff of around 100. The Institute was founded by Russian policy researchers.
- NORC at the University of Chicago is an 80-year-old think tank with about 800 staff. It has conducted ground-breaking studies, created and applied innovative methods and tools, and advanced principles of scientific integrity and collaboration. NORC has a large policy research programme in transitional and developing countries.
- The Results for Development Institute (R4D) is an international non-profit organisation with think tank roots located in Washington that works only in transitional and developing countries. It takes the long view of successful development that embodies collaborating as equals with local ‘change agents’—government officials, civil society leaders, and private sector innovators — to support translation of knowledge into practice and developing relevant new knowledge. Its premise is that local leadership is central to self-sustaining change. I have been associated with R4D since its founding and include it among the sample because of its innovative approaches to its central work and an array of management issues.<sup>3</sup>

Below these are referred as participating organisations (POs). As usual, I do not ascribe any particular policy to a specific organisation by name, consistent with my confidentiality pledge to them. However, to be able to link different actions to a specific PO I have assigned each of them a label, e.g., PO-1, PO-2, and so on. The numbering does not correspond to the order in which the POs are listed above.

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1. R. Struyk, ‘The Significant Evolution in Staff Assessments: A Good Fit for Think Tanks?’ posted at *On Think Tanks* blog, August, 2019. <https://onthinktanks.org/resources/the-significant-evolution-in-staff-assessments-a-good-fit-for-think-tanks/>.

2. I am very grateful to Missy Nachbar, Tatiana Polidi, Gina Lagomarsino, and Natasha Roberts for discussing their institutes’ practices, engaging in somewhat broader, stimulating exchanges about staff assessments, and in some cases sharing internal documents.

3. For a statement of R4D’s principles see [http://r4d.org/about/our-principles/?\\_ga=2.168268713.987849210.1606301519-237446072.1602841814](http://r4d.org/about/our-principles/?_ga=2.168268713.987849210.1606301519-237446072.1602841814).

# What's going on among private-sector white-collar firms?

To give some context for the survey findings this section presents information on general patterns of the practices of white-collar service firms gleaned from the limited secondary sources. Because the developments of primary interest are so contemporaneous, little has appeared in the academic literature or elsewhere to date. An overview article by Jena McGregor on the U.S experience that appeared in mid-October 2020 offers some valuable points:<sup>4</sup>

- A survey by McKinsey & Co. and LeanIn.org of 317 US employers found that about 30 percent of companies said they adjusted their performance evaluations to account for the challenges created by the pandemic and 5 percent had put reviews on hold or cancelled them.
- A larger survey by Aon, a consulting and insurance firm, of 1,300 human resources officers found 47 percent had made changes to their employees' goals or were considering them. (No information on staff assessments is included in the article.)
- More generally, Marianne Cooper, a senior research scholar at Stanford, believes that while many firms were deeply shocked by the pandemic, 'that's not getting reflected in the way so many companies are thinking about performance reviews.'
- Human resource experts are saying that remote work naturally forces more scheduled check-ins between bosses and workers. On this point, a more recent (5 December) article reports that despite more contact most interactions are Zoom group meetings that are not appropriate venues for supervisor-staffer exchanges. It concludes that more one-on-one interactions are needed.

In sum, there was some early response by human resources departments to the pandemic's shock, but at least in these early days it has been far from universal.

At the same time, it is worth noting that The Economist reported that a survey of 4,700 workers across six countries commissioned by Slack, a corporate-messaging firm, found working at home was very strongly supported by respondents. Respondents rated the arrangement as improving both their work-life balance and productivity. Overall, only 12 percent of respondents wanted to return to a regular office schedule.<sup>5</sup> Relevant to this point is that the widespread use of hybrid models – staff mostly working remotely with periodic days in the office – is already raising red flags of possible favouritism of staff who have more in-person time with supervisors.

4. Jena McGregor, 'One potential Pandemic Upside: Performance Reviews are Getting Simpler', *Washington Post*, 20 October 2020, p. A19. Some of the text in the bullet points is directly quoted from the article.

5. Bartleby, 'Stop All the Clocks,' *The Economist*, 17 October 2020, p.55, US edition.

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# Think tanks' responses

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The central question is how frequently have my POs adopted substantial changes to their assessments in response to the COVID-19-related dislocations, particularly working remotely. The answer is: not very. There are several supporting indicators from the survey.

Only PO-2 reported making a change directly related to COVID-19. It adopted a less demanding review process: in cases where a staff member was meeting expectations, the manager only had a short form to fill out with fewer categories/dimensions rather than the longer, standard, more detailed one. The change was made because managers were feeling very stretched. Many have additional childcare responsibilities or other domestic responsibilities when working at home.

When asked how well the overall assessment process worked in 2020 compared with 2019, all four respondents selected the response, 'About the same as in 2019', from among three options. One PO, number 3, did say that there were some rough spots in implementing its new 360 review<sup>7</sup> element. But overall this was not viewed as significantly affecting the process or results.

The experience of one of the POs provides something of a controlled experiment on the importance of the supervisor and staff member meeting in-person to establish a relaxed, collegial environment for the review discussion. PO-4 has operated on a hybrid staff attendance routine at its office since the COVID-19 became a significant hazard. A maximum of 70 % of its staff can be in its office on any given day according to local regulations, and this share is generally present. Seating is one person per office. Some assessment interviews were done in person and others remotely using Zoom.

My respondent at PO-4 reported that there was really no difference in the atmosphere or degree of collegiality between the two environments for the staff assessment discussions. She commented that after six months of very frequent Zoom contacts among the staff, being physically or virtually present did not matter for most staff. This is consistent with explicit statements by the PO-1 and PO-3 respondents and with those in many other observers' reports in various countries.

Worth noting is that PO-4 added a question to the form completed by a staffer in the first step of the assessment process. The form covers such things as the staffer's accomplishment during the year, areas in which she acquired new skills, whether the career development plan she developed with her supervisor a year ago had been fully accomplished, and how her supervisor could help with next career development steps. The new question asked the staff member to rate her current productivity compared to that before the pandemic and possible reasons for any change. My respondent said that Q and A launched quite interesting discussions especially when the opinions of the staffer and the supervisor did not coincide. Generally, the most productive workers believed they improved or retained their high-level of performance, while those who had some problems with productivity and/or the quality of their work before the pandemic did not believe they had attained better performance.

None of the respondents noted any new differences in performance associated with differences in workers' ages. Interestingly, significant variations were recently flagged by the Pew Research Center based on its survey work: the principal difference was in respondents' motivation to do their work since remote working began. Fifty-three percent of workers aged 18-29 cited lower motivation compared with 20 % of those over 50. (Figures for the 30-49 group are not given in the article.<sup>6</sup>) Part of the explanation may rest in the younger group reporting a higher incidence of inadequate workspace and more frequent interruptions than their elders.

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6. Pew Research Center, 'How the Coronavirus Outbreak Has—and Hasn't—Changed the Way Americans Work' 9 December 2020. <https://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2020/12/09/how-the-coronavirus-outbreak-has-and-hasnt-changed-the-way-americans-work/>

7. In a 360 performance review the person being assessed gives the names of various people they work with regularly in administration, and these people are asked about their dealings with the person being evaluated.

# Conclusions

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The good news is that the pandemic, with its effect of inducing staff to work remotely, was fairly easily accommodated by the usual think tank staff assessment protocols. This result is particularly important because of the widespread view that post-pandemic a larger share of think tank staff, and white-collar workers more generally, will be working remotely.

That said, one should be honest about the countervailing forces at work in promoting the status quo. In my conversation with the respondent at PO-3 about developments at her think tank, she said the lack of adjustments to date made sense. Change is expensive. Hence it is rational to first acquire significant experience with working under the new conditions to be sure that change is required; similarly, confidence is needed that working remotely is here to stay for at least the mid-term. In short, continued monitoring is warranted before investing in system revisions. More changes may arise in the next couple of years.