For a long time I have heard of the 1953 Harvard study or the 1979 Yale study on the effects of written goals of graduates on the long-term performance of people. Many coaching, training and personal development providers quote one or the other as the reason why we should each have written life and performance goals.

The study asked one question:

“Have you set clear written goals for your future and made plans to accomplish them?”

Often methods and strategies we use in business and our organizations are based on what we read. But can we trust everything we read? Is your organizational development or change process based on fact or fiction?

Many often quote the outcome of the study this way:

There was a study done at Harvard between 1979 and 1989. Graduates of the MBA program were asked “Have you set clear written goals for your future and made plans to accomplish them?” The results of that question were:
• Only 3% had written goals and plans
• 13% had goals but not in writing
• 84% had no specific goals at all

Ten years later Harvard interviewed the members of that class again and found:

1. The 13% who had goals but not in writing were earning on average twice as much as the 84% of those who had no goals at all
2. The 3% who had clear, written goals were earning on average 10 times as much as the other 97% of graduates all together. The only difference between the groups is the clarity of the goals they had for themselves.

OR

In 1953 a team of researchers interviewed Yale’s graduating seniors, asking them whether they had written down the specific goals that they wanted to achieve in life.

Twenty years later the researchers tracked down the same cohort and found that the 3% of people who had specific goals all those years before had
accumulated more personal wealth than
the other 97% of their classmates
combined.

Now while there is evidence that people
completing Harvard based MBAs do out
perform others this is not linked to
written goals per se.

**REALLY?**

I was intrigued by these often quoted findings,
and in 2008 I started research onto the origins
to find the original research data. Hundreds of
hours and dozens of emails later the results
were in—there was no such study at Harvard
or Yale!

Indeed even Harvard administrators
themselves say: It has been determined that no
“goals study” of the Class of 1953 actually
occurred. In recent years, we have received a
number of requests for information on a
reported study based on a survey administered
to the Class of 1953 in their senior year and a
follow-up study conducted ten years later. This
study has been described as how one’s goals at
graduation related to success and annual
incomes achieved during the period.

The secretary of the Class of 1953, who had
served in that capacity for many years, did not
know of [the study], nor did any of the fellow
class members he questioned. In addition, a
number of Yale administrators were consulted
and the records of various offices were
examined in an effort to document the
reported study. There was no relevant record,
nor did anyone recall the purported study of
the Class of 1953, or any other class.

It seems that there were two early “reporters”
of these studies—Mark McCormack (What
They Don’t Teach You in the Harvard Business School)
& Brian Tracy (Goals!) who perpetuated the
myth that these studies took place. Other self
development gurus who have helped to
perpetuate the myth include Zig Ziglar, Tony
Robbins and Tom Bay in his book, Look Within
or Do Without.

Followers of any of these well-known coaching
gurus would have no reason to doubt them or
question the research cited by them. An
example of a coach referring to the written
goals myth and supporting it by referring to
Tom Bay’s work is available [here].

If you run a Google or Bing search for “Yale
written goals study” or “Harvard written goals
study” you will find 1000s of references – none
of them true!

So why is it still being perpetuated 15 years
later? This can only be described as a myth or
urban legend amongst life coaches, consultants
and personal development/success gurus.

Any training or coaching provider that quotes
this “research or study” places their own
credibility in jeopardy. Referring to “findings”
without any substantiated research limits how
much credibility we can assign to their other
products and services.

“It can be proven that most claimed research findings
are false.”

~ John Ioannidis ~
Professor of Medicine, Stanford University

Source
Could the outcome of the non-existent written goals study be true even if there was no such study? In 2007, Professor Gail Matthews in the Psychology Department of Dominican University of California (not Yale or Harvard) did conduct a written goal study. Her study provided empirical evidence for the effectiveness of three coaching tools: accountability, commitment, and writing down one’s goals.

This means that there now is a study demonstrating that writing one’s goal enhances goal achievement. Although unlike the miss-quoted Yale or Harvard, her research was not a longitudinal study.

(This article was adapted from Mike Morrison’s blog with his gracious permission.)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mike Morrison has 25 years experience in HR/OD, and is an established interim manager, coach, business adviser, mentor, instructional designer and trainer. On occasions he writes, blogs, tweets and takes the odd day off.

His latest book is Organizational Development - Theory and Practice, He is the founder and director of RapidBI, a U.K.-based company that specializes in comprehensive business improvement review for use by coaches, consultants, and business advisers.

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“Type I and Type II errors are, respectively, when you allow a statistical test to convinces you of a false effect, and when you allow a statistical test to convince you to dismiss a true effect. Despite being fundamentally important concepts, they are terribly named. Who can ever remember which way around the two errors go? Well now I can, thanks to a comment from a friend I thought so useful I made it into a picture:”

Never confuse Type I and II errors again:
Just remember that the Boy Who Cried Wolf caused both Type I & II errors, in that order.
First everyone believed there was a wolf, when there wasn't. Next they believed there was no wolf, when there was.
Substitute “effect” for “wolf” and you’re done.

~ Tom Stafford ~
Mind Hacks