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Abstract

After the COVID-19 pandemic many employees were forced to work from home. Most of these employees were showing low performance when working remotely. The low performance was associated with the different distracting factors depending on each individual. A small group of engineers were studied in an effort to help them regain performance when working remotely. It was found that with clear broken-down objectives, constant remote engagement, team progress monitoring and the correct tracking tool, high performance was achieved.

Introduction

Since the COVID-19 pandemic shutdown many employees were forced to work from home. Right after that, some of them started to show low performance when working remotely. A federal agency from Pennsylvania was the perfect example of a workforce directly affected by low performance when working remotely. Within this agency, there is a small group of engineers responsible for the compressed air system inside the aircraft carriers. This team was also known as the Aircraft Carrier Team (ACT). The ACT was performing poorly when working remotely, they were studied and the situation was addressed.

Background

A federal agency from Pennsylvania was the perfect example of a workforce directly affected by low performance when working remotely. This federal agency is responsible for supporting the US Navy with all the engineering tasks needed by the fleet. Within this agency, there is a small group of engineers responsible for the compressed air system inside the aircraft carriers in the fleet. This team was also known as the Aircraft Carrier Team (ACT). The ACT was performing poorly when working remotely. One of the main roles of the ACT was to hire qualified contractors to perform maintenance and repairs on the compressed air system onboard all the aircraft carriers. If the ACT does not award the required number of contracts per year, the ships are forced to either hire the original equipment manufacturer (OEM) or a small local business. The service from the OEM tend to come at a significantly higher rate, while the service from small businesses tend to come at lower rates but, higher risks.

If the small business performs an improper repair, catastrophic failures can occur and emergency repairs might be needed. These emergency repairs are considered high visibility and demand a massive amount of time and funding to be executed.

Problem

Before the pandemic, the ACT was awarding an average of 4.4 contracts per year. After the pandemic, the ACT reduced the number of contracts awarded to only one per year. Figure 1. shows the ACT performance decrease since the COVID-19 shut down in year 2020.

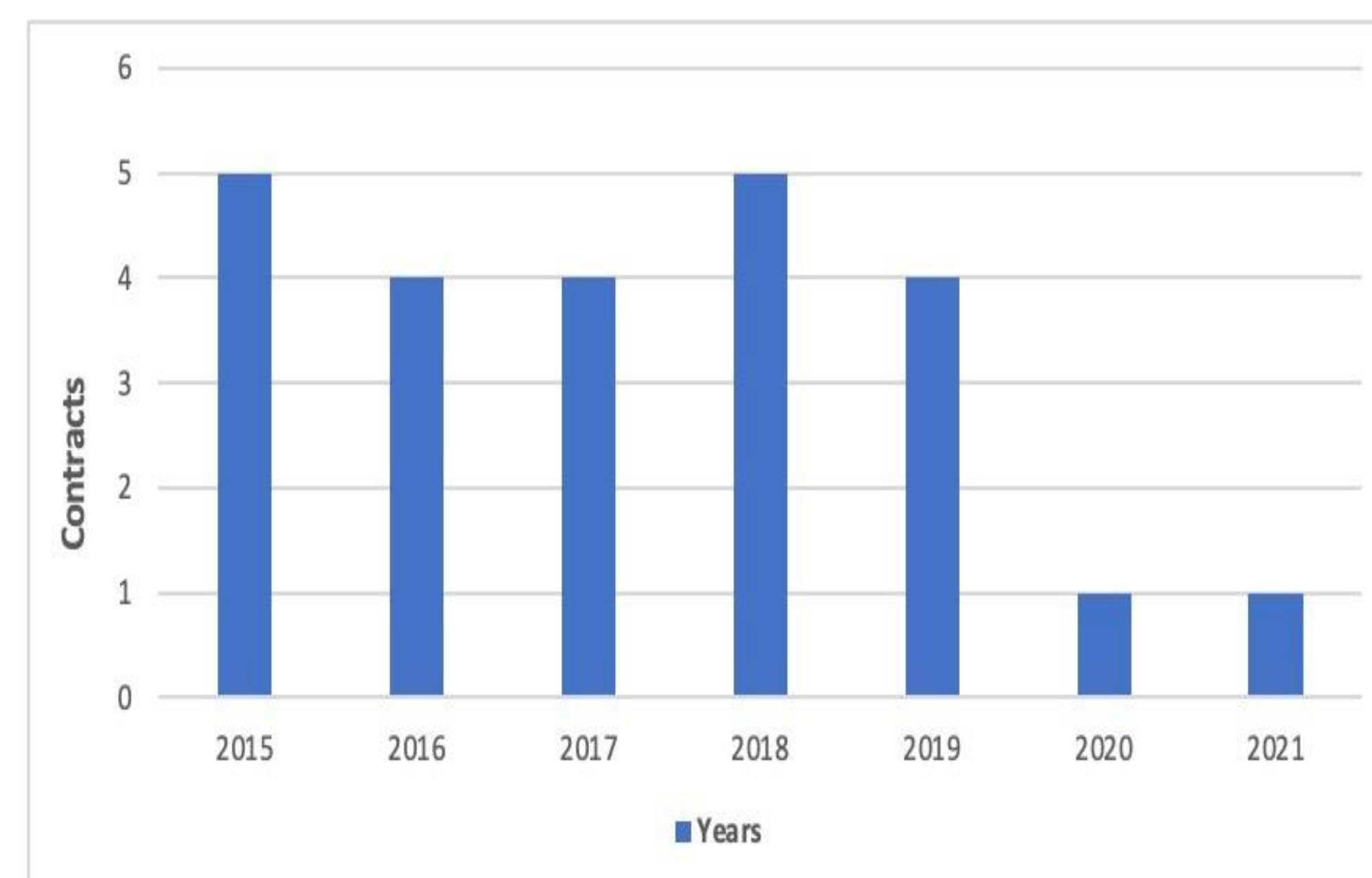


Figure 1
ACT award contract

Methodology

- The management information technology device list (ITDL) was reviewed and the ACT was contacted in order to ensure that all technological needs required to work remotely were met.
- The ACT was virtually brought together to make them aware of their low performance, severity of consequence, share empathy and hear their concerns.
- It was made clear that transparency would be kept at all times during the new planning process.
- Another meeting was held involving the ACT in the organizing and planning process. Clear objectives and expectations were set.
- The ACT worked on creating a Microsoft project file with all the mayor milestones that were required.
- A motivational speech was given finalizing with a promise of a reward for the team member with the highest overall performance.
- Recurrent weekly meeting was held to analyze results and adjust methodology.

Results

Two team members volunteered to lead the contract package development processes. The ACT weekly virtual interaction increased to a minimum of two meetings per week. The ACT also awarded two repair contracts in four months while remaining under budget, as showed in Figure 2. It is expected that the ACT will award six contracts in one year performing over the 4.4 previous award contract average.

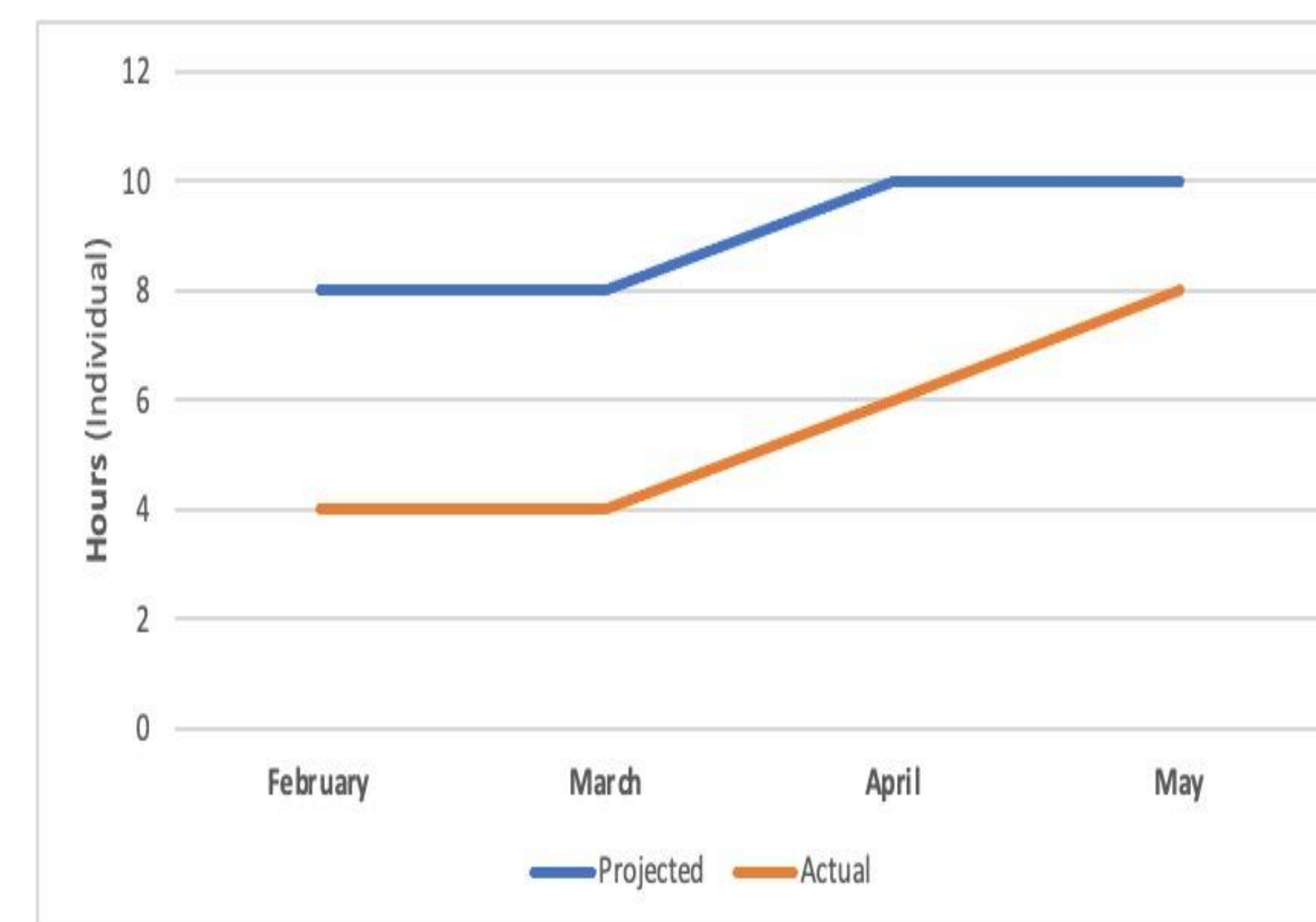


Figure 2
Contract development labor hours

Conclusions

The ACT performance results showed that it takes time and motivation for employees to quickly adjust to a new working environment. It also showed that if the tasks being performed do not depend solely on collaboration; frequent virtual interaction, constant motivational encouragement and the implementation of the proper monitoring system can significantly increase employees' performance when working from home. Although the ACT number of awarded contracts increased, there was not an accurate tool in the evaluated agency to measure the ACT total number of hours worked outside of business hours. The ACT was provided with a full home office set up and they are allowed to work as many unbilled hours as they desire. This prevents the accurate confirmation of ACT overall productivity increase. It remains unknown whether the ACT performance was increased, or they just worked additional hours to deliver on time. Nevertheless, the project objective was achieved. It is recommended to establish a method to track more accurately employees' number of worked hours regardless of their billing status.

It is also recommended to further investigate the relationship between the performance of employees' working from home with the creativity of the task being performed.

There is no recipe for a successful working from home policy. However, managers must evaluate the proposed policy based on their specific company situation. In addition, a trial run is highly recommended before any official policy is implemented.

Finally, focused employees outperform remotely while others cannot. This is independent from their environmental situation as focused employees tend to set themselves for success while the rest risk themselves with additional distractions. However, unfocused employees can still perform significantly better under broken-down specific short-term objectives and expectations as they were given to the ACT. This helped mitigate procrastination and the unnecessary postponed of nonemergent tasks, ultimately empowering them to meet the trimester goal.

References

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