

Performance Appraisals 2020/21: Employee Evaluations During a Pandemic



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The procedure for annual performance evaluations typically involves considering what an employee has accomplished since their last yearly review, especially in terms of meeting goals and making improvements in targeted areas. This year is very different, though. Chances are that what has unfolded since the first quarter of 2020 is drastically different than what anyone could have anticipated during the previous evaluation cycle or when performance objectives were set for the current year.

Flexibility in Evolving Circumstances

When preparing to do 2020/2021 performance evaluations, flexibility is key. Holding employees to the same goals that were put in place during last year's performance evaluations is likely not realistic in light of recent circumstances impacting businesses and their employees. The world of work has changed for just about everyone over the past several months.

Many businesses have experienced significant impacts related to COVID-19, including drastic increases or decreases in demand, quickly transitioning some jobs and/or services to virtual work, adapting the work environment to provide social distancing for roles that can't be performed virtually, supporting employees through unexpected challenges at home such as virtual school and COVID-19-related concerns or diagnoses, and many more. It's likely impossible to measure the success of either employees or organizations under these circumstances using standards that were put in place before any of these things happened..

What Does Effective Performance Look Like Now?

Reviewing employee job descriptions is ordinarily the first step for employee evaluations. That's still a good thing to do this year, but the perspective needs to evolve. This year, it's important to look at job descriptions through the filter of the pandemic, pulling out what is reasonable to expect employees to do — and to what extent — in light of the pandemic's impact on business operations and individual employee circumstances.

In other words, employers need to consider what effective performance really means in light of all that has happened since the beginning of the pandemic, as well as expectations about possible changes in the coming months. Consider if some ordinary standards should be relaxed or temporarily redefined at this time. For example:

- Criteria for sales professionals in industries that have experienced a drastic decline in demand due to the

pandemic certainly need to be adjusted with this in mind.

- Some metrics for call center representatives may need to be adjusted to accommodate longer call times with customers seeking to discuss pandemic-related concerns.
- Collections representatives' performance may have decreased significantly through no fault of their own, due to sudden and drastic increases in debtors' unemployment.
- The workload of human resource professionals struggling to interpret and apply Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act requirements may have made it impossible for them to accomplish strategic goals.

These are just a few examples of the many ways an employee's performance could be directly impacted by the pandemic in ways that could not have been foreseen during last year's evaluation and goal-setting period.

Adapt Goals to Current Circumstances

Goals still matter, of course, but they do need to be adapted to current circumstances. Employee goals that were set for the current year need to be considered through the lens of pandemic impact. Consider what overall company targets were for the current timeframe and compare them to year-to-date achievements. If there is a significant overall difference, use information about the difference between projections and actuals to adjust expectations for what employees should have achieved at this point in time.

- If a company's production was forced to decrease, either due to shutdowns or a decrease in demand, then related employee goals should be adjusted accordingly. If the company was closed or working at a portion of capacity due to the pandemic, it is not reasonable to consider individual goals set before the pandemic to still be realistic.
- For a company that experienced increased demand paired with workforce decreases due to quarantines,

COVID-19 related leave, or other issues, it's important to consider whether expectations of those who shouldered the increased workload should be adjusted. Consider whether some measures might not be reasonable under emergency production circumstances.

Consider quantitative ways to adjust employee goals, such as production based on a percentage of hours worked rather than a flat quantity derived using a formula that likely isn't relevant under current circumstances.

Give Credit for Adaptability

This is also a good time to consider updating the criteria used to evaluate the effectiveness of an employee's performance. Chances are that your company has managers and employees both who showed leadership in the organization's efforts to transition some teams to remote work with little or no advance warning. Their skills and adaptable behaviors are extremely valuable in the 21st century world of work.

Seek to identify key behaviors relevant to how employees have handled the pandemic response that should be recognized and reinforced this year that wouldn't have even been considered during the last evaluation period. For example:

- Team members who exhibited innovation and adaptability regarding new ways of working due to the pandemic should be recognized for their ability to effectively cope with change.
- Managers should be recognized for their willingness to do what is necessary to keep operations going by stepping outside of their comfort zones to lead virtual teams, when they were accustomed to managing on-site employees.
- Those with previous experience working remotely who proactively helped other departments to transition to remote work should be recognized for their ability to step outside of their own functions to help peers and the overall organization.

- Technology and HR professionals who quickly got systems in place to empower people to work, meet, onboard and communicate effectively in a virtual environment should be recognized for their innovation and quick response time.
- Employees who gracefully adapted to workplace safety measures made necessary due to pandemic-related regulations or evolving safety concerns should be recognized for their cooperative attitudes.

Consider Compliance Implications

Regardless of how the performance appraisal process is adapted or implemented in your organization, it is always important to consider compliance implications. Be sure that employees aren't marked down or otherwise disadvantaged in terms of how their performance is evaluated for taking leave as provided for under the CARES Act. The same is true for requirements, guidance or recommendations issued by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), local health authorities or other state and local officials (such as a governor or mayor).

Don't Pause Performance Evaluations

Even though the process of evaluating performance needs to change this year, it's important not to just skip annual evaluations if they are an ordinary occurrence in your organization. If you skip them this year, you'll be sending a message that they're not really important. Managers may be more likely to see them as just a paperwork exercise moving forward; employees may think that the company and their managers don't really view performance measures and employees' feedback as important.

Just because you shouldn't pause evaluations doesn't mean that your approach can't change. Some options to consider include:

- Using an approach similar to previous years, with modifications regarding what is considered appropriate performance in light of difficult circumstances.

- Choosing a theme for this year's evaluations and structure the year-end/beginning-of-the-year evaluations around that theme. For example, if you choose team behaviors (which is certainly relevant in 2020), opt for a 360-degree evaluation rather than a traditional supervisor/subordinate approach.
- Seeking feedback from managers and employees regarding what they perceive as the most important measures of success in the current environment. Use that information to develop the equivalent of a one-time use evaluation form, specific to 2020. Gather this information via an anonymous survey and/or web form that team members can use to share their thoughts.
- Encouraging each division or department leader to work with their team to come up with evaluation criteria specific to 2020 that could be used just for that department or in combination with other departments that faced similar pandemic-related challenges.
- Taking a more individualized approach that involves a structured dialogue between managers and their individual employees rather than traditional quantitative evaluations. If you've been considering adding one-on-ones to your traditional performance review process, this may be a good time to pilot this approach.

These are just a few options to consider. One or more of them may be appropriate for your organization, or there may be a better path. Ultimately, the leadership team needs to decide what makes sense in your organization and visibly champion that decision.

Be Transparent About Changes

Whether you choose one of these options or something different, transparency is critical. Company leadership should let employees know what changes are being made to performance evaluations and why.

- Let employees know that leadership is committed to meeting their need for feedback.

- Inform employees that changes to ensure the performance appraisal process is fair and equitable are being implemented, since so many factors impacting the organization and employees have changed over the past year.
- If pay increases are typically awarded at performance evaluation time but the businesses financial situation doesn't allow for that this year, tell managers and employees in advance so that the news is separated from the performance evaluation process.
- Allow enough time to pass by between announcing that there will be no increases (if that is the case) and performance review discussion so that the conversation can focus on performance rather than employees' reactions to the unwelcome news about compensation.

One lesson just about everyone has taken from 2020 is that the future is not predictable, so don't make any promises about what the next year might hold.

Utilize Appropriate Collaboration Tools

Evaluations should be conducted with the new world of work in mind. Rather than requiring employees to meet in-person with their supervisors, use a videoconferencing application for individual conversations, on its own or paired with other virtual collaboration tools. This will, of course, be necessary for those who are working remotely, but it's also a good idea with those who are in-office.

- This will help demonstrate to employees that management is committed to maximizing their safety above all else.
- It will also show that members of management are altering their ways of working due to the pandemic, just as they are asking employees to do.

For production workers who don't have their own computer workstations, set up a conference room with a computer that can be used for these meetings and schedule a time for each of them. If they don't have access to email or lack computer skills, assign a manager

or administrative employee to set up their meeting a few minutes ahead of time so that they won't have to deal with any setup.

Building a Solid Foundation for Tomorrow

A company that isn't willing to be adaptable about how employee performance is measured and evaluated during the extraordinarily difficult circumstances

everyone has faced during the COVID-19 pandemic will likely find itself experiencing decreased employee morale, engagement and job satisfaction, as well as difficulties recruiting and retaining talent as the economy starts to recover. How a company treats employees when times are tough is very telling about how the organization views its most valuable resource. People are more likely to be loyal to companies that value them and treat them well in good times and in bad than to ones that don't recognize the challenges employees face in difficult circumstances.

Additional Resources

[Performance Appraisals - Federal](#)

[Performance Appraisals - Supervisor Briefing](#)

[Performance Reviews - Handbook Statement](#)

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