

A GUIDE TO MANAGING PROBATION PERIODS SUCCESSFULLY

During a new employee's probationary period, the line manager should follow a formal structured procedure that is aimed at assessing and reviewing the employee's performance, capability and suitability for the role.

It will be the line manager's responsibility to structure the programme in such a way that both parties are clear about what to expect.

The programme should include:

- regular monitoring of the new employee's performance through progress meetings;
- identification and discussion of any problem areas at the earliest possible time;
- the provision of regular constructive feedback;
- supervisory support and guidance; and
- the provision of any necessary training and coaching.

Although HR are available to provide support and guidance where required throughout the programme, all these actions will ultimately be the line manager's responsibility.

A probationary period must be properly planned if it is to be effective. The programme also needs to be agreed with the new employee, who must be clear on what is expected of him or her. This information will include:

- clear job outputs, i.e. what the new employee is expected to achieve during, or by the end of, the probationary period;
- the standards of performance that are required in respect of the job duties;
- the standards or measurements against which the employee's performance will be assessed;
- any agreed development activities;
- a description of any relevant standards of behaviour, for example in relation to liaison with clients and colleagues.

If the employee is unclear about any of these areas, he or she may lack commitment to the programme.

Training plan

A probationary period will often include a training plan.

The idea of a training plan is to outline everything that the employee needs to learn in order to carry out the role effectively. A training plan might cover:

- specific job tasks;
- the organisation's procedures on, for example, health and safety or the use of computers;
- general workplace practices;
- product and/or technical knowledge;

- computer skills.

The training should be structured in stages in order to enable the employee to work towards competent performance by the end of the probationary period.

Progress meetings

The process of probation should include regular progress meetings between the line manager and the employee. It is advisable to conduct these at least once a month. Monthly meetings throughout the probation period will allow the employee's performance and progress to be monitored on a 'little and often' basis.

Planning progress meetings

Progress meetings should be planned and scheduled at the outset of the employee's employment. It will be the line manager responsibility to ensure that all probationary reviews are completed on time.

At each meeting, the manager should aim to:

- highlight areas where the employee is doing well;
- explain clearly and in precise terms any areas in which the employee is falling below the required levels;
- explore the possible reasons for any failure to meet the required standards;
- discuss and agree whether or not any specific training or coaching is required;
- discuss any other relevant matters such as timekeeping, attendance, general conduct or attitude;
- invite the employee to comment on issues such as the extent to which he or she has integrated into the department and how well he or she is getting on with colleagues;
- give the employee an opportunity to ask questions or raise concerns about any aspect of his or her employment.

It is important that the line manager does not restrict the progress meetings to discussions of problem areas, but also identifies and comments on the positive outcomes that the new employee has achieved.

Line managers should be prepared to provide all possible support to their new employees in order to give them a fair opportunity to become fully integrated and productive employees in the longer term.

Action plans

At the end of each progress meeting, the manager should agree an action plan with the employee so that his or her progress can be monitored during the next few weeks.

The action plan should be documented in detail, stating what should be done, by whom, how and by when. In this way, the employee will be aware of what is expected of him or her by the time of the next review.

Conducting progress meetings

The monthly progress meetings should be a two-way process and provide both the manager and the employee with the opportunity to discuss progress on a one-to-one and confidential basis.

Where any concerns have arisen about the employee's performance, the line manager should discuss these fully, openly and supportively with the employee and an action plan to remedy the problem should be agreed.

Where necessary, the line manager should clearly explain the consequences of underperforming to the employee. The individual should be helped to understand that a continued failure to achieve the required standards could ultimately lead to his or her employment being terminated.

Do be clear and precise when discussing areas in which the employee is failing to meet the required standard, providing specific examples where possible.

Do give the employee prompt feedback if problems arise.

Do try to establish any underlying reason for performance problems.

Do focus on successes as well as failures.

Do be tolerant of mistakes - the new employee has to learn and cannot realistically be expected to do everything proficiently at first.

Do deliver any necessary criticism in a constructive way.

Do encourage the employee to raise any concerns or suggestions that he or she has about any aspect of the employment.

Do listen to what the employee has to say.

Do ensure that you set aside time to spend supporting the employee.

Don't automatically blame the employee for mistakes or lapses in performance.

Don't assume that unsatisfactory performance is being caused by something that it is within the new employee's control.

Don't postpone or cancel progress meetings unless this is unavoidable. Doing so may result in the employee assuming that he or she is unimportant to the organisation.

Don't allow interruptions during progress meetings.

Don't allow any personal like or dislike of the new employee to influence your assessment of his or her performance.

Don't expect perfection.

Communication skills required for a progress meeting

If a progress meeting is to have a positive outcome, open, honest and unambiguous communication will be necessary.

The manager should:

- stick to facts and avoid expressing personal opinions, unless these are constructive and can be backed up by facts;
- be specific when identifying any shortfalls in performance;
- avoid generalisations such as 'you never meet your deadlines' or 'you're doing OK';
- ask open questions;
- listen actively to what the employee has to say and take it on board;
- use positive words such as 'improvement' and 'achievement', rather than negative words such as 'failure' or 'weakness';
- check for understanding, for example by asking the employee to summarise his or her understanding of what has been discussed.

Keeping records

The content of progress meetings should be fully and clearly documented.

Your notes should provide an accurate record of what was discussed at the meeting, including any areas of concern, as well as a note of the areas in which the employee is performing well.

A copy of your notes should be provided to the employee. If there are any areas of disagreement over what should be recorded, the manager should try to resolve these with the employee prior to the document being signed off by both parties. If this is all done by email, then a brief email from the employee agreeing the notes will suffice.

At the end of the probationary period, the manager should conduct a 'final progress review' of the employee's performance and suitability for the job.

It is extremely important that the final review meeting is held on or before the end of the agreed probationary period. If the meeting does not take place by this date, technically the employee's appointment will be confirmed by default! This will mean that any subsequent dismissal on account of unsatisfactory performance will be harder for the employer to justify. If for whatever reason you cannot hold the final progress review on or before the end of probation you should seek prior agreement with the employee to delay that meeting and specify in writing a new date.

The final review will allow both the manager and the employee to:

- identify and discuss any areas in which the employee requires further training or development;
- check how the employee feels about his or her employment in general;

- explain how performance will be managed in the future, for example through the employer's formal appraisal system.

If the employee's performance is satisfactory, the manager should issue a letter/email confirming their appointment to the employee.

If the employee's performance has not been up to the standards required, the manager should discuss the matter with HR as soon as possible.

Extending probationary periods

If, at the end of the set probationary period, the employee's performance is unsatisfactory - or in cases where the employee or the manager has been absent from the workplace for an extended period during probation - an extension of the probationary period may be appropriate.

An extension should normally be sought only where there are special circumstances justifying it. The manager should consult with HR prior to any decision to extend an employee's probationary period is confirmed to the employee (although, if appropriate in the final review meeting, you can indicate it is your intention to recommend to HR that their probation period should be extended).

As an employee will gain the right to claim unfair dismissal after completion of two years continuous service, any extension of a probationary period should normally be for no more than three months.

Where it is agreed that an employee's period of probation will be extended, HR will:

- write to the employee confirming the length of the extension and the date on which the extended period of probation will end;
- that this additional period of probation will allow the employee to demonstrate a sustained improvement in the quality and quantity of their work, thus enabling the University to make a properly informed decision as to the viability of continuing the employment relationship beyond the probation end date.

In addition it will be important for the manager to set out the terms of the extension (this may be done within the notes of the final review meeting, however a separate note may be advisable in some cases if this isn't covered in the meeting). It will be important to state clearly:

- the reason for the extension - for example that the employee's performance has fallen short of certain standards, but the manager reasonably believes that an extension of time will be effective in allowing him or her to achieve these standards;
- the performance standards or objectives that the employee is required to achieve by the end of the extended period of probation;
- any support - such as further training - that will be provided during the extension.

It is not advisable to extend an employee's period of probation more than once, or to make extending probationary periods the norm. An extension should be agreed only if there are special factors that justify it.

HR Division
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