
ASK LINDA

Dear Linda: I work for a firm that has a very casual attitude about performance evaluations. I would like to see them employ a more structured format. Do you have any suggestions on how to get started with something like this?

Every legal assistant deserves feedback on a regular basis, and yes, it should be structured to include how you have performed, encouragement to improve and be promoted to more specialized tasks, opportunity to inform the attorneys about changes you would like to make, and understanding the connection between your compensation and your productivity.

There is no magic to a performance evaluation. It should be a very objective checklist of your behavior, work product, application of skills, your relationships inside and outside of the firm, recognition of any special projects you have worked on and your goals for continuing education and improvement. Each element should be rated and I suggest gauging performance on a scale of one to five to reflect levels of satisfaction and improvement needed.

The evaluation should also include a subjective analysis of your performance. The attorneys should have a chance to add additional comments and explain their conclusions. The results should be presented to you verbally, and in written form. You should keep copies for future reference. Typically performance evaluations coincide with compensation increases and take place at the end of the calendar or fiscal year, or on your anniversary date. You may want to set up a system for being reviewed more often, or to include mini evaluations at the close of special projects. Sometimes it makes sense to get feedback right away because people forget. At best get the attorney and/or client's comments in writing to be discussed at a later date.

A good performance evaluation should include:

- Number of billable hours expected, actualized and realized
- Ability to meet deadlines and timeliness
- Communication, organization, technology and practice specific skills
- Quality of work
- Specific, special and pro bono projects and assignments
- Relationships with people
- Professional demeanor and work ethic
- Continuing legal education
- Responsibilities that were new that year
- Association work and other recognition

You will want to customize your evaluation to the work you do. Think about including:

- Follow through and keeping attorneys apprised of status of assignments
- Instilling confidence in clients and attorneys
- Accepting and applying suggestions and criticism
- Flexibility and ability to handle variety and stress
- A specific analysis of each and every facet of your job

One of the most important aspects of a performance review is your goals for the next year. You should have a road map into the future at all times. Consider what skills you would like to renew, add to your collection and/or what areas you would like to discontinue. Include your aspirations for continued schooling and proposals for your involvement in professional associations and presentations at your place of employment.

Your evaluation should include a frank discussion about changes in your compensation, including a direct connection to how you have added to the profit and value of the firm. As an integral part of the profit team, you are entitled to know what you have contributed and how you are being rewarded. Discussions about salary and bonuses are stressful and burdensome but they are inevitable. You should be given an opportunity to ask questions and to respond accordingly.

Attorneys want to be around people who are continually striving for new goals. Make your evaluation a time when you can prove you are worth the investment they are making in you and go for the gold.

Linda S. Jevahirian is the Founder and President of Legal Search & Management, Inc. LS&M is a specialty firm that provides temporary and permanent recruiting to firms and corporations interested in improving their practice through the use of legal assistants.

Linda is a noted speaker, trainer and author. Her articles have appeared in numerous legal publications, including, the *Michigan Bar Journal*, *Michigan Lawyers Weekly*, *The National Law Journal* and *Legal Assistant Today*.

Linda speaks regularly to legal assistants on job-related issues. For further information you can contact her at 248-471-3443 or lindajev@aol.com. Watch for LS&M's new web site at legalsearchonline.net.

