

Your job performance appraisal

Making it a career boosting experience

Patrick Forsyth



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Your job performance appraisal: making it a career boosting experience

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The author

Patrick Forsyth is a consultant, trainer and writer. He has worked with organisations large and small and in many different parts of the world. He is the author of many successful books on management, business and careers and prides himself on having a clear how-to style.

One reviewer (“Professional Marketing”) commented: *Patrick has a lucid and elegant style of writing which allows him to present information in a way that is organised, focussed and easy to apply.*

In this series he is also the author of “Your boss: sorted!” and “How to get a pay rise”. His writing extends beyond business and he has had published humorous books (e.g. *Empty when half full*) and light-hearted travel writing: his latest travel book is about Thailand and is titled *Smile because it happened*.

He can be contacted via www.patrickforsyth.com

1 Introduction: a career boosting opportunity

“No one can make you feel inferior without your consent”

Eleanor Roosevelt

The terms used vary (job appraisal, job performance appraisal, performance review and so on) but this meeting, which may be annual or more frequent, is part of everyone's work experience.

Let's start by looking at what you do. It is likely that your work is demanding. You no doubt feel you do your best. Maybe your job is satisfying, not least because doing it gives you a sense of achievement. You feel you make things happen, that you make a difference. So, why do you hate the thought of a job appraisal meeting? Once a year, sometimes more, someone sits you down in an office and – this is how it may seem – tells you all the things you are doing wrong, inadequately or failing to do at all. If that is the case no wonder you do not look forward to it.

Yet you should look forward to it, it should be useful, indeed it should be a significant element in monitoring and developing your career. Yet too often such sessions seem at best irrelevant, at worst humiliating; and too often too they lead to little or nothing, other than perhaps resentment.

Nevertheless job appraisals go with the territory so to speak. Work in an organisation of any size and you will have one, if for no other reason because employment legislation (certainly in the U.K. and in many other places too) prompts most organisations to undertake an appraisal process. But it should, and often is, more than that. And it can be much more.

Appraisals represent a unique opportunity to check progress, assess results and look to the future – acting to make it more likely that future performance will not only be satisfactory, but that it will achieve something more. Or they should do. The aim of this book is simple: to help you get more out of your next appraisal. This means not just helping to make the experience easier or more comfortable. Rather it is to see that more positive action results from it to help make next year's work more satisfying, the desired results more likely to be achieved and, in the long term, that your career moves forward satisfactorily.

There is more to the process than just handling the meeting well, much can be done beforehand; but first we turn to look at the exact nature of the appraisal process.

2 What's the appraisal process all about?

As was made clear in the Introduction, sometimes job appraisals are not very constructive. Nor are they motivational. If they are not understood, if managers dislike conducting them, or find the process difficult, then they are unlikely to achieve very much. If this is the case then they represent a lost opportunity, because appraisal should be useful to the organisation, the appraiser and the appraisee. In this chapter and the next the intention is not look at how to appraise people, though managers who have this task to do may well find the content useful, but rather to review the experience from the point of view of those being appraised – the appraisees. Going into your next appraisal with the right knowledge and intentions can help make it constructive, helpful and something that helps both your job and your career.

Of course, you are dependent to some extent on the systems used by your employer, and how management implements them. But you can influence the process yourself – maybe to a significant extent. How an appraisal is made constructive matters less than that it is. No one should go blindly into their appraisal meeting hoping for the best and aiming only to “play it by ear”. It is too important for that. Potentially you have a great deal to gain and it is certainly worth some thought before it begins.

2.1 Why job appraisal?

It is most often mandatory, indeed the fact that usually you have no choice about whether you attend an appraisal meeting makes considering the reasons the company and the appraiser have for insisting on it a sensible starting point. After all, you do not make all the rules. There is probably a system, forms and procedures which exist and which will be part of what occurs. This does not mean that it is impossible to influence matters, but if you are to do so you need to understand the reasons why things happen the way they do.

Job appraisals may come in many guises. In many organisations this term is sufficient to identify the kind of meeting and process involved. In others there may be other names. These usually involve words like planning, assessment, individual and performance – *Personal performance assessment*, perhaps. Whatever it is called the reasons for its existence are likely to be similar.

Specific reasons, which should benefit both the individual and the organisation, include:

- Reviewing individuals' past performance
- Planning their future work and role
- Setting specific individual future goals
- Agreeing and creating individual ownership of such goals
- Identifying development needs and setting up development activity

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- On the spot coaching
- Obtaining feedback
- Reinforcing or extending the reporting relationship
- Acting as a catalyst to delegation
- Focusing on longer term career progression
- Acting to motivate the individual being appraised.

The review may focus on some or all of these; they are not mutually exclusive, but the relative emphasis may well vary. Overall the intention, through all of the above is to improve existing performance (taking the view that even good performance can often be improved), and make the likelihood of achieving *future* plans that much greater.

2.2 Assessing your position

At the start it may be that the first time you hear mention of an organisation's appraisal is at a recruitment interview before you take up a job. Certainly on that occasion, or soon after taking up employment, is a good time to ask some questions. Ideally, given a good employer, the appraisal will be seen as beneficial for both parties so questions should be well received. It is certainly a reasonable area for a prospective or new employee to investigate.

Consider asking questions such as:

- Will I have a job description?
- How often will I receive an appraisal?
- What form will my appraisal take?
- What topics will be reviewed at appraisal?
- What specific targets form part of the review?
- Is there a standard rating procedure? (maybe you can see, or ask to see, any documentation)
- How does this system relate to salary review?
- What is the link between appraisal and development and training?
- Overall, how will this meeting advance my career?

The answers you receive may be illuminating. If there is clearly no view of this area being important it might even change your view about a prospective employer or manager. It may seem an easy option to escape a real form of assessment, but do you really want to work in an environment where how you are doing is of so little consequence? On the other hand if it transpires that a major part of a future review will centre on the achievement or not of a single specific target, then this too is worth knowing.

TIP: Certainly you will be able to approach your first appraisal meeting much more easily if you have firm knowledge of its purpose and how it is regarded in the company. Do not leave key clarifying questions unasked.

2.3 Considerations about rewards

Despite what is often assumed, it is not strictly the role of appraisals to act in any way to fix salary, or other reward levels, for the future. Having said that, many companies do link appraisals and salary review closely, and – at worst – appraisal is no more than a quick chat followed by the disclosure of what next year's salary is going to be (and sometimes a spirited defense by management as to why it cannot be more). On occasion, and at some levels, much of the meeting can then follow a salary announcement and be concerned only with negotiating the levels of salary and rewards; and, yes, let us note firmly here that negotiation is a career skill and one that may assist you in career as well as job terms. In other words discussion (or argument) about salary can take time away from other important aspects of the discussion and make the whole occasion less useful.

More sensibly many organisations separate the two processes. Appraisal is an objective assessment of work to date and what makes it valuable are the reasons stated earlier. Salary and an assessment of how it should change is another matter, best dealt with at another time. Certainly if it is known that appraisal meetings end with the announcement of a revised salary, then it may distract both the appraiser and the appraisee from concentrating on the issues at hand in the early part of the discussion, and prevent honest and open discussion of any difficulties.

TIP: If you want to judge the way your own organisation works with regard to appraisals this is one of the factors to check; you may find the actual approach used most constructive when the two factors are separated.

2.4 The link to employment legislation

It is beyond my brief to include a digression and review of all the complex ins and outs of employment law. Suffice it to say that it is not just complex, it is constantly changing and that organisations are very aware that transgressing it can be a time consuming and costly business. The newspapers regularly bear testimony to the extremes involved, as they bring reports of cases addressing such matters as wrongful dismissal or discrimination, in the courts and the industrial tribunals that are also involved.

The link here with appraisal is primarily to performance. Ultimately a person's failure to perform can result in dismissal. But what is satisfactory performance and how does an employee know whether they are achieving it or not? The answer needs to involve the formality of job descriptions and appraisal. Simplistically the law makes it difficult to dismiss someone for poor performance if they are able to demonstrate that they have been given no clear definition of their job, or regular ability to know how they are performing. Not unreasonable perhaps. But this link conditions some of the elements of both systems and job descriptions, and appraisals can be deployed only as an insurance against future trouble of this sort.

There is no need to overreact to this picture. Most employers do have constructive reasons apart from this for running an appraisal system, they want to get the most from it and they want it to assist in producing good performance and results in the future. It does no harm, however, to bear this background in mind as part of the picture.

2.5 Additional factors

Additionally, an element to bear in mind as you contemplate the rationale for whatever system your organisation uses is how it may relate to particular circumstances. For example, cultural factors vary. Some American-owned organisations have much more formal systems than is usual in the United Kingdom. In other countries the prevailing styles may differ; for instance, such systems in France are very much more concerned with behavioral factors than some others. Some are truly bizarre: I once had contact with an American company who operated a policy they called “planned insecurity” in their sales department. The person at the bottom of the league each quarter was fired.

Similarly, systems may reflect topical factors. For example, a company may have been taken over and be changing to the system of the new parent, measurement is increased as a prelude to some particular event (this might be positive or negative: the laying off of staff or the expansion of the business).

Again, if you are aware of such factors then you enhance your ability to interact with the system in the right kind of way.

TIP: Overall the need is to understand what is being done, why it is being done the way it is and what attitudes to it, amongst appraisers and appraisees, exists. If a little research is necessary to achieve this, then it likely amounts to no more than a few questions and the time taken is minimal.

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3 The job/career opportunity

You need to be clear up front in your own mind about how appraisal is regarded by the organisation for which you work and by the individual manager who will conduct your appraisal meeting (and note this may mean managers, sometimes more than one is involved). Then you need to think about how it can help *you*. Clearly you need it to be constructive. A “messy” meeting helps no one, and clarity of purpose is one contributory factor in making it go well.

Thus you need to set yourself specific objectives under a number of headings:

- Planning how to make positive points about performance during the period under review
- Being ready to respond to points raised, including negative ones, appropriately
- Projecting the right image
- Reviewing specific work plans for the next period ahead
- Reviewing factors on which success in the future depends
- Identifying the need or desirability for training and development
- Looking ahead to longer term career development
- Linking discussion to salary and benefits review.

You need to think about all of these positively. Appraisals are rightly described as an opportunity. What needs to be done is not simply to think broadly about the sort of year it has been overall, but to have clear intentions regarding not only *what* needs to be (or will inevitably be) discussed and about *what you can get from the discussion*.

The first two points above – essentially planning how you will handle the points discussed, either about the past or future, will be left on one side for the moment. The other points are reviewed here, in turn.

3.1 Projecting the right image

This is important: the attitude you take to this spans the whole process. It may help to think about it in two ways, the image you project in terms of your:

- **Attitude to the appraisal:** Here you need to make sure that it is clear that you accept and understand the need for appraisal, that you are approaching it constructively and that you intend to help ensure it helps you produce a good performance in the next period. You are unlikely to impress an appraiser if you seem resentful of the process, take a negative view or are inappropriately defensive. It is easy to over react to criticism – and realistically there may well be some – you need to state your side of things, but you may also need to accept and agree that some things were not perfect and move on to other matters.

- **Attitude to the job:** Remember that how you are perceived has a direct bearing on your job prospects, everything from the likelihood of your taking on a little more responsibility to you being promoted. Remember too that people extrapolate their perceptions. Arrive ill-prepared for your appraisal and you may find that you are not just seen as momentarily disorganised with regard to an important occasion, but that assumptions are made that you are generally poorly organised in the way you do your job. Such a view might directly influence decisions about your future.

So, consider how you want to be seen (this is useful beyond appraisal). You may want to be seen as knowledgeable, expert, capable, innovative or creative, good with people or at communicating, efficient and productive, well organised, reliable, giving appropriate attention to detail, confident, or any or all of these and more. You may want such factors to come over in a very specific way: displaying impressive knowledge of computer systems, perhaps, or being able not just to communicate but produce the best written report style in the office.

TIP: If you think about it, not only are there a fair number of points in such a list, but they are also all things you can elect to project. For example, you may not be naturally well organised, you work hard at it and manage to achieve what you want, but on occasions such as appraisals you make sure there is no chance you will be mistaken for someone who is inherently disorganised. The moral here is to make sure you think through, in sufficient detail, how you want to come over and make doing so an active process.

3.2 Consider your specific work plans

Here you need to focus on the job you do and what doing it will entail in future. Maybe you are about to embark on managing a particular project. This might entail liaison with others, tight deadlines or push you into areas beyond your current experience. If so, consider what help, advice or support you might find useful from your manager and use the appraisal to touch on the process. It is unlikely to be the occasion to discuss such matters in detail, you could seek to set up another meeting for that, but having the fact of it on the table, as it were, may influence other elements of your discussion.

3.3 Consider success criteria

This links closely with the above heading and you need to think about what your job will entail over the coming months, and what factors are involved that affect your potential success. Maybe economic conditions are changing and you feel targets should too. Or staffing changes are planned which will tie up time on handover activity. Or systems changes will mean time needs to be spent on training or running things in.

The examples above are negative. That is they might hinder your ability to do the job. Positive factors may need discussion also. For example, systems changes might free up time and provide the opportunity for you to take additional initiatives elsewhere.

In either case, it may be useful at a later date to be able to link a request for support to even an overall intention agreed at appraisal.

3.4 Development needs

All aspects of training should be a mandatory topic for any appraisal. In most organisations it pays to be seen as keen on training (and from a career point of view actually keen on it too, of course). It is potentially useful. Indeed, given the dynamic world in which we all live, it is sensible to assume that whatever skills you have will not see you through an entire career, but that they will need updating and extending on a regular basis. As John Wooden said *It's what you learn after you know it all that counts*.

Training can be viewed in two ways:

- **Short term needs:** those things that link very specifically to the current job and the work over the coming months. If you know you are going to have to undertake many more formal presentations in future, for instance, and do not feel sufficient confidence in your ability to do them well, then appraisal is a good time to aim to get agreement to attend a course.
- **Longer term needs:** here you may see a longer term need and consider it worth making a start on whatever it is sooner rather than later; and certainly instead of having to do something in a rush later. Or you may simply want to extend your competencies, abilities and perspective with a general eye on the future. Organisations will often accommodate both, though perhaps it is easier to gain agreement to the former, so again you can form specific intentions as to what you want to achieve.

Note that training and development encompass a wide range of different activities, literally from reading a book (even a short one like this!) to attending a course of sufficient duration to cause problems to continuity and your ability to keep things moving while you are away. Be realistic. You are not going to get permission to spend three months in an American Business School *every* year, but you should aim at agreeing some mix of development activity on a regular basis. Appraisal is also a good moment for some feedback, and perhaps some appreciation, about past training and its usefulness; tell the boss just how useful it was.

TIP: Aim high. It is better to suggest more training than is approved, than to have no ideas about any, and it is easier to trade down than up.


3.5 The link to career development

Having an active plan for the development of your career is surely only sensible. This involves assessing your strengths and weaknesses, looking at what direction you would like to take and what might be necessary to allow you to take it. From your point of view progress may ultimately take you away from your existing employer. If this is a firm intention, it may not be a suitable topic for discussion at an appraisal. However, the longer-term possibilities do need some discussion, and consideration is necessary here if you are to agree matters that may form important stepping stones along the way.

Such matters may initially be minor, say a small involvement with another department or activity. Or they may involve, or set up, much more of a jump ahead. You might know what you want to do in this regard, and want to discuss it or push for it. Alternatively you might be at the stage where an appraisal meeting is an opportunity to get some advice or start a longer-term dialogue. In such discussions, remember to emphasise the gains to the organisation of changes you suggest, rather than simply saying that it is good for you.

Again having specific objectives in mind is important. Just planning to say “What about the long term?” might take you into a substantial and useful digression, but it might only prompt a brief comment and a return to the next topic. Such a question does not constitute a true objective. Remember that any objective needs to be specific, preferably measurable and linked to clear timing. So you may need to lead in with something that begins more like this: “In two years’ time I would hope to be doing....., to have a salary of..... And be in line for (the next step up). How can we...”. Aiming high is good, but at the same time you must select steps that are likely to be achievable (not: *how do I become M.D. within the year*). And you need to make your aims realistic (for example: not aiming in a direction that clearly needs special skills you do not have, at least without including something about their acquisition).

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This is an important area, and one that it easy to give too little attention to in the face of more immediate pressures. Yet the worst position to get yourself into is one where you look back and say to yourself, “If only...”. There is a line in one of John Lennon’s songs that says *Life is what happens while you are making other plans*. Not a pleasant thought. The moral is always to balance your short and long-term thinking and action about the future.

3.6 Overall rewards

This goes hand in hand with appraisal, though as has been said, the actual decisions may be separated. However it is handled in your organisation never go into an appraisal meeting without some sensible thoughts and intentions about salary and benefits. Again aiming high is fine, but specific objectives are essential. It does not help you decide how to raise or deal with matters if you simply say to yourself “I want as big an increase as possible” (even if this means it will prove true!). You need to think about things in context (inflation, the levels paid to your peers and in other companies etc.). And remember that reward packages are complex these days. More money is something most people want, but changes to a range of things from car schemes to pensions also have monetary consequences, and it pays to keep the broad picture in mind.

There are obviously a range of things that need consideration here. Some relate one to another, like new responsibilities and any training that makes you able to take them on. Some have topical importance; others have longer-term implications. There is too much here to rely on a brief moment’s thinking ahead of the meeting seeing you through, and the last thing you want is to come out of so important a meeting and remember something you wanted to raise and simply forgot.

If you are clear in your mind, and sensibly have made some notes too, about what you want to achieve in all these areas then you can proceed to more formal preparation with that in mind. It may seem to indicate a greater task than it does. In reality, this thinking is something undertaken on a rolling basis. For the most part you are updating a pre-existing picture rather than starting with a blank sheet of paper, and this helps keep the process manageable.

Whatever thinking through is entailed to clarify the range of objectives you then adopt, however, it is likely to prove worthwhile. Such thinking is the first step in ensuring you get the most from your appraisal.

4 Preparing for your appraisal meeting

A major part of what you can do to make your review go well is done *before* the meeting.

4.1 Information: the foundation of success

Appraisals are most likely to be constructive when they concentrate not just on broad issues, but on specifics: what actually was done, how it was done and what results were achieved. But a great deal can happen during the course of a year. Try an experiment. Try to recall what you were doing in a particular week – pick one at random, maybe nine months ago. Even if you consult your diary, your recollections may be less than perfect.

One of the things that may occur during an appraisal meeting is precisely this. You will be asked to recall something from the past and comment on it – how a project went say. And you may not always get notice of what aspects of the last year's events this will relate to. However a topic comes up for discussion, introduced unexpectedly or with some notice or suggested by you as a significant event worthy of consideration as an example of how things have gone over the past year, you need to have some details of it.

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Perfect recollection is clearly not possible. No one recalls every detail of everything with which they have been involved. But some firm basis of recall is clearly useful. This may apply to details such as your diary. A day that notes: *10am meeting with PF re: project progress*, may have been highly informative the day before, but mean nothing six months on. Some vigilance in such matters may well be useful, but something more formal is also sensible, because the foundation of a successful appraisal meeting is good information.

4.2 Collecting the right information

Documentation is an inherent part of the appraisal process (more of this later), so having what might be called an Appraisal collection file relating to your past work activity and appraisals is logical enough. Simply dividing it into past and future sections can help you ensure the next one goes well.

The starting point is the documentation from your last appraisal. From then on you should make a point of collecting into that file documents (or copies of documents – their first purpose may suggest another file as their main resting-place) that have a bearing on your next meeting. These will include:

- A note of any courses you go on (as a minimum file a copy of the course outline and a copy of any evaluation form you may have been asked to complete, perhaps together with a note of where any resume notes are to be found)
- A note of any “significant events”; these might include something about what was your first presentation, say, or the fact that you spoke at a trade association meeting or joined a significant committee
- Notifications of targets set, progress against them and the ultimate results achieved
- Comments made by other people: maybe the M.D. wrote you a letter of congratulations about something, or a satisfied customer put pen to paper about service you delivered.

Other useful documents might be any memos, minutes of meetings or other documents that may be useful as a record of your activity and outputs.

The idea is not to hoard everything or spend a long time amassing this, a note rather than a whole document may well be sufficient. You can sensibly match the information you gather to the topics that you know will feature in your forthcoming review. For example, if you are judged in part on your communications skills, keep some evidence of them.

TIP: Remember that this is not solely a “boasting file” containing references to your successes. If things do go wrong, or less well than you had hoped, they may well be subject to review also – this extends the information you can usefully collect.

In addition to the kinds of things mentioned, there are various other items of background information that may be added as back up. Key amongst these is your *job description*. This is not a formality, though employment legislation and sometimes heavy-handed Personnel practice can sometimes make it seem so, it is a working tool. Everyone needs a clear brief as to what their job entails (and maybe what lies outside its jurisdiction). In many companies, certainly at departmental level, job descriptions – if necessary minus any confidential information (about salary grades, say) – are circulated. This means that members of a team see exactly how responsibilities fit together, something that should include the manager of the section. This is something that you might bring up at an appraisal meeting as a means of clarifying matters and ensuring effective teamwork.

Sometimes appraisals use the structure and content of a job description as an element of their agenda, if so it is useful to have this in mind and, if not, then you may want to refer to areas included in the description but not mentioned.

Consider any other documentation that your own role might make useful, for example:

- Financial results (especially when they form, even in part, a basis for your evaluation)
- Standing or exceptional instructions
- Records indicating factors that have changed during the year
- Notes following any less formal evaluation or coaching that may have taken place during the year.

If this sort of appraisal collection file is kept up to date and in order, then it can act as a useful reference when you come to prepare for your next appraisal meeting. There is one key reason for all this – the avoidance of argument. It is all too easy for appraisals to deteriorate into a “table tennis match” of “it was/it wasn’t” arguments if any key facts are subject to misinterpretation or dispute. It benefits both parties, and makes the meeting much more likely to be constructive, if facts are clear to all. You cannot necessarily rely on your appraiser to produce the memo you know shows results improved by 12.7%, you are just as likely to have them saying “Well, figures were only up 10% or so”; and the difference may be important.

The intention here is to ensure a constructive base for the meeting. It is not intended to suggest that there is a need for elaborate defenses against appraisers eager to “do you down”. But some of the points made here apply equally to appraisers. If it is difficult for you to remember the detail of what you have been up to all year, how much more difficult is it for a manager who has eight or ten people reporting to them to do so for each individual?

TIP: The overall moral here is that you cannot hope for a satisfactory experience of appraisal just by “winging it”; information must be to hand and if this demands organization or even research, so be it.

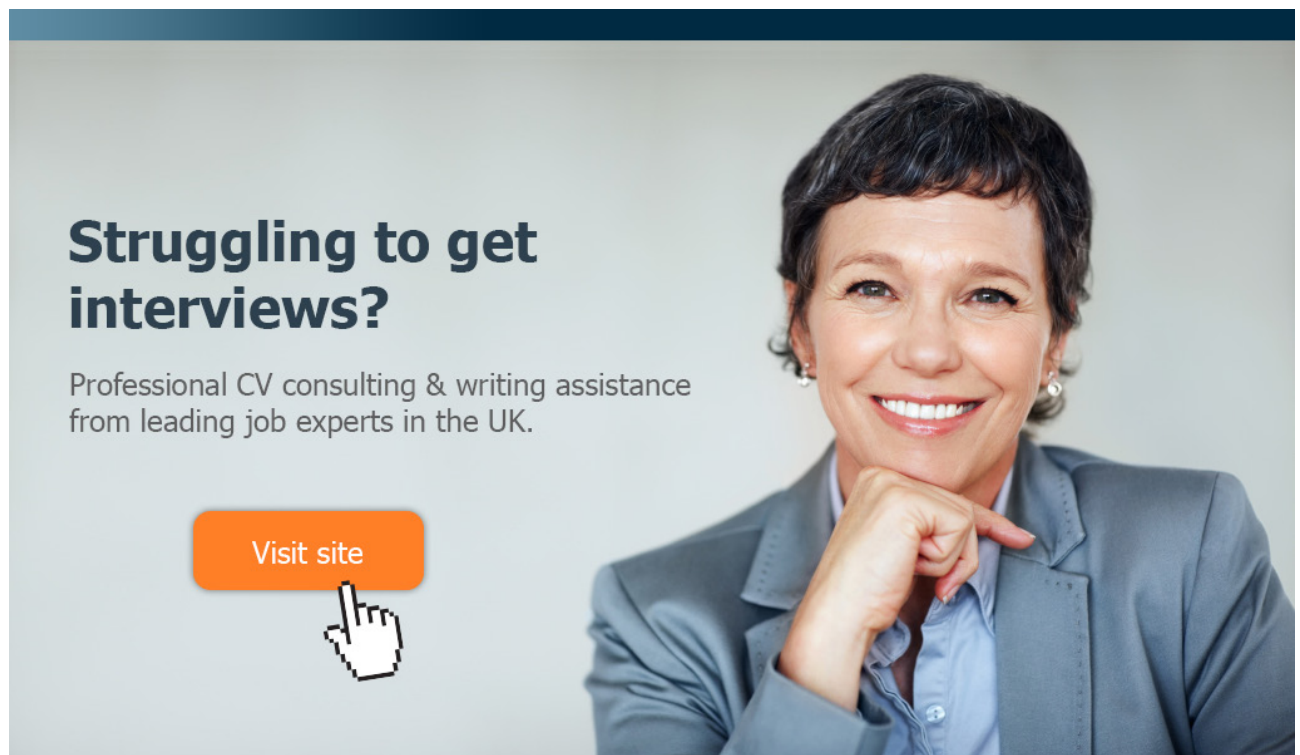
The overriding intention commended in this section is to play your part in ensuring that there is a sound basis of pertinent, accurate information for you to draw on as your appraisal date arrives.

Next, the focus is on the actual forthcoming meeting and the preparation that demands.

As has been said your appraisal is too important to simply try to “wing” it on the day. Preparation is surely necessary if you are to get the most from the process. Yet preparation is essentially no more than a formalised version of the age-old advice to engage the brain before the mouth. It need not be daunting, and it need not take too long.

4.3 Take the initiative

Amongst the guidelines given to any manager about conducting appraisals will be the need to give appraisees adequate advance notice. Surprise is not intended to be part of the procedure. Rather it is intended that appraisal meetings review the considered thoughts of both parties. You should get adequate warning and an agenda, setting out content and sequence, (and giving an idea of how long the meeting is expected to last) and – depending on the system being used – you may be asked to complete a form and return it ahead of the meeting. If the latter is the case then you have a formal opportunity to set down something about your performance.



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All this may well happen. If so, then that's all well and good. The occasion is sufficiently important to you, however, for you to take an initiative if this is not the case. You can:

- Ask in advance when an appraisal is to be scheduled (and maybe ask for other attendant information as you do so)
- Respond to any brief notification by asking for additional detail, specifying points such as:
 - Duration
 - Location
 - Agenda etc.

If necessary also ask to have included any items that you feel will be useful. If such a request is made positively – *perhaps I may suggest that it might be useful to...* – there is no reason why it should not be taken that way. If you want due consideration of points you raise it may be better to put them in writing rather than simply stick your head round someone's door and say, "Do you have a minute?".

Conversely, you can be sure that if you simply arrive at the meeting and then start asking for changes and additions to the agenda it will be likely to cause problems.

TIP: Note particularly any areas where clarification is necessary ahead of the meeting (or perhaps as it starts), decide how and when you will check them out and take the necessary action. One example, which may be important, is confidentiality. Before you speak out you need to know how this is regarded. Care spent on this sort of reconnaissance is always worthwhile.

4.4 Coping with systems

Appraisals need a systematic approach. Without any system the review would become very subjective, and then it would be difficult to ensure that it was either thorough or fair. Because of this most organisations have thought through both the topics and headings under which they will evaluate performance, and the rating scales used to actually record a judgment on standards of performance. This is reflected in the forms and formats that you will find being used during the process.

Very often such documentation is divided into two distinct sections: one concerned with the past and a review of past performance, and the other concerned with a preview of the future. The first of these, as has been mentioned, may be used to collect your own initial thoughts on evaluation ahead of the meeting.

Systems vary, not least in the amount of detail they are designed to collect, and many are tailored to reflect the nature of particular jobs and the tasks they entail. The checklist that follows summarises typical areas scheduled for review:

CHECKLIST: Appraisal form**Reviewing past performance**

Agenda: the first questions may be linked to finalising the meeting:

- What do you want to come from this meeting?
- Are there special areas you would like to spend time on? – And, if so, why?

Job: here questions focus on the task in hand, both *qualitatively* with questions about what you like, have enjoyed or found satisfying or challenging (or a problem); and *quantitatively* with questions about successes, and results and targets met or missed.

Relationships: investigating your work in terms of how it interacts with other people (whether peers, subordinates or those elsewhere in the organisation – or outside it – with whom you must work or liaise)

Development: this heading allows a focus on skills: what is needed for the job now, how you rate yourself at them, and whether there are skills which need adding or extending (or which are not currently being utilised)

Personal: an opportunity to think about things more in terms of feelings: have things been easy or difficult? Would you do things differently if it were possible? Are you being stretched, are you learning or getting into a rut?

Special projects: some such heading allows specific, or more topical, areas of your work to be discussed.

Planning for future success

This section of the form should rate at least half the discussion and time (possibly more). Essentially the overall focus is on the next period ahead and the way in which the chances of achieving success during it can be strengthened. Often the same main headings repeat, and questions need to allow:

- Changes and differences that are known or can be anticipated (year on year)
 - Ideas for improvement that might become part of next year's way of working
 - Priorities for the period
 - Your role and how it might change.
-

You should always respect the system. Even if you do not like it you may be unable to change it, and any action you did take to see it amended in some way might be better kept separate from the cycle of your own appraisal. It is one thing to suggest going beyond the system, indeed the system may allow for this by specifically asking you for additional suggestions for discussion, however it is quite another to ignore elements of it without good reason.

Some companies accompany their appraisal materials with a “guidance for appraisees” document. If you are given something like this always take time to read it carefully. Also, whether you have such notes or not, if you do not understand some aspect of the system *always ask*; and do so in good time. It helps no one to go into your review unclear in some way as to what is expected of you.

4.5 Scales of measurement

An inherent part of the appraisal format is likely to be rating scales. These take many forms and so too do the way organisations interpret them. Some may link them precisely to specific outcomes (including salary judgments); others use them less formally, with one end of the scale implying no action and the other some degree of corrective or developmental action.

Scales are *not* only there to flag the poorer performance or identify weaknesses (though they do that); it may be as useful – or more so – to explore what creates good performance and see if there are lessons to be learned from it or passed round the organisation.



The scales should certainly be studied therefore. The following shows some of the formats you will perhaps encounter, they could be a:

- **Simple numeric scale:** 1–6, 1–7 or whatever, with one end being positive and the other negative (these could alternatively use labels such as A, B, C etc.)
- **Descriptive scale:** this may or may not be linked to numbers and the words may or may not be chosen with precision: e.g. Excellent, Very good, Good, Fair, Adequate, Unsatisfactory
- **Graphic scale:** this is effectively just a line with identified positive and negative ends: e.g. HIGH ----- LOW and perhaps with mid or quarter points shown
- **Comparative scale:** this might be a list of perhaps 4–10 statements: phrases like “Better than most in the group”
- **Behavioral scale:** this rates a list of options that specifically relates to things done, specifying them, for example, as Always, Almost always, Usually, Infrequently or Never done.

Essentially all serve the same purpose, and also act to ensure consistency and fairness – that is all people are assessed in the same kind of way, and each person is rated in a way that allows comparisons year on year. *Note:* the most important aspect of ratings is a line beyond which action is necessary – and thus prompted – when performance fails to reach a required level.

TIP: It may be worth thinking about specific topics you believe will be discussed in terms of whatever ratings are used. Some answers or comments may usefully start with a phrase like, “I think I rate XX in terms of this project, because...”

Some preparation here can create fluency.

So, study the system, complete and return any forms – on time – and set aside some private time also to consider the detail of what your appraisal might, will or should involve and help you make it work for *you*.

4.6 Think ahead

The systems apart, appraisals should be conversations. They may, however, cover a wealth of detail and last from an hour or so to two or three hours (or longer). It is a mistake to think you will remember everything that you want to ask or mention as the meeting goes along, and annoying to realise later if you find you have forgotten to raise a key issue as you intended.

All that is necessary is some thought and a few notes.

Keep the format of the appraisal in mind. After the first one with a particular employer you have a reasonable idea of how it will be done, and prior to the first time questions can ensure it is not totally unknown territory. For example, if you know you are likely to be asked some introductory and broad-based question to start with – *All in all, how would you describe the year?* – then how you encapsulate matters may stand some thought. A good turn of phrase may help get the meeting off to a good start and also help you establish the focus you want.

TIP: Here is also an opportunity to introduce specific topics. You might say such things as, “I believe it’s been a good year, certainly projects such as X and Y produced good results and extended my abilities too”.

Beyond that you need to consider systematically (and with the system in mind) a number of factors to help you through the meeting:

- **Which topics you want to discuss:** these may be well described by the agenda and appraisal forms, but you may wish to add to or amend the list.
- **Examples within each topic:** for example, if your project management skills are to be discussed, then you may want to select one or more examples of what you have done during the year, and note specifically *how* you made them go well (choose one that did!), and what the outcomes were at the end. If you know examples will be raised of things not going so well, do not just amass excuses, think what came out of it that was positive – what did you learn? How much better would something similar go next time?
- **Detailed points:** think also how you want to exemplify or describe the detail arising from the discussion, and *how* exactly you want to make the point. The same action could be described as taking place because of your excellent planning, or as a result of your inherent flexibility and ability to respond promptly and intelligently to unforeseen occurrences.
- **Areas for questioning:** and perhaps the actual questions you want to ask. Well-phrased questions speak of planning and a considered approach and this may be what you want to project. Not least, the job here is to discover what you want quickly and easily in a way that does not disrupt the agenda or take up too much time.

There is no need for secrecy about all this incidentally, if you find it useful to sit down in the meeting with some notes, and even a file of exhibits, in front of you, then you should do so. You do not want to either forget something or handle it inappropriately; and the appraiser will approve of your preparation.

While you can never anticipate everything and planning must never be a straightjacket, a sound plan will make it more likely that you will handle the meeting well and that you will cope with any unforeseen circumstances along the way as well.

One last point ahead of the meeting: if you have thought through things in this kind of way you will feel more confident about the meeting. They can seem stressful occasions; after all there may be a good deal hanging on them. But stress is a reaction. A difficult meeting you have not planned is certainly likely to worry you. A well-planned meeting, one that you have confidence in your ability to handle, is more likely to go well.



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5 Your manner and conduct in the appraisal meeting

So, the moment arrives. You are in the hot seat, and you have to do your best to make the meeting itself go well. As the last section explained, preparation is vital. A deep breath as you walk through the door is unlikely to be sufficient, but there are certainly things which, when you get to this stage, you can do to assist in making the process go well. None of the detail that follows is itself complex. But appraisals, like many meetings for that matter, do require the orchestration of a number of different elements. The complexity – and the need for care – is more in this overall orchestration than in any one individual area. The better you understand the nature of the meeting, and all that needs or might go on in it, the easier this orchestration will be.

5.1 First impressions last

Any injunction about first impressions is likely to seem to be something of a cliché. That may be. But the point remains – if everything gets off to a good start, then this gives you greater confidence and acts to continue to keep the meeting on track.

Several things are worth bearing in mind at this stage. They include:

- **Your appearance:** you need to look the part. I would not presume to tell you how to dress. Suffice to say that this is not a good day to find your suit looks as if it was slept in (or was!) or that you are at the end of six weeks of saying, “I really must get my hair cut”.
- **Your manner:** this too is a personal matter, though worth a moment’s thought. You may well have your appraisal conducted by someone you know well, the manager you work with day to day. But it could be someone else, perhaps more senior, perhaps less well known to you; and it could, in some organisations involve two people or even a panel. Do not overreact and take the meeting as having to be very formal, but adjust your level of familiarity or flippancy as seems appropriate.
- **The prescribed procedure:** if necessary, take the initiative and double-check anything unknown for instance about the agenda, format or duration for the meeting. This should have been spelt out in advance; if not, such things are best clarified at the start.

Then relax. This is a meeting that is designed to help you and to benefit the organisation. It should be interesting, it should be constructive and it may even be stimulating; both parties surely aim to benefit from it. Approach it as such, rather than with doom and gloom or too much apprehension, and it is likely to go better. Let any reservations you have about it show and that alone could change the attitude an appraiser takes to you.

Once the meeting is under way there are several techniques that you will need to deploy – all with your objectives in mind, and in a way that reacts intelligently to what occurs (which will never be exactly as you predicted). Prime are your abilities to listen, to ask questions, to comment, deal with any criticism, and pick up and link to any opportunities presented.

These techniques are now considered in turn.

5.2 Listening

Of course you listen. Really? Never had a breakdown in communications because you did not really take something in properly? Honestly? If you want to demonstrate to yourself how listening varies in effectiveness, just consider what happens when someone says something with which you disagree. At once your mind begins to spend some of its power, not on listening, but on developing a counter argument. The effect of this can be pronounced.

Not only do you want to take in clearly everything that is said to you in an appraisal, you want to *appear* to be a good listener, one who takes the proceedings seriously. The checklist that follows sets out some principles that are useful and which certainly show listening to be an active process.

CHECKLIST: Effective listening.

- Want to listen: recognising how it can help you is the first step to doing it well.
- Look like a good listener: let the appraiser see they have your attention by appropriate eye contact and acknowledgement of what is said to you.
- Listen and stop talking: you cannot do both at once, the meeting will become awkward and you need to resist the temptation to interrupt, waiting until the point is fully made (or what you do will seem like evasion).
- Use empathy: put yourself in the other person's shoes, try to see things from their point of view and make it clear you are doing so.
- Check: clarify as you go along if anything is not clear, leaving it can simply build up bigger problems later.
- Remain calm: concentrate on the facts and try not to let overreaction, or becoming emotional, hinder your ability to take in the full message.
- Concentrate: and allow nothing to distract you.
- Focus on key points: get to the nub of what is being said, which may be buried in other, less important, information and comment.
- Avoid personalities: concentrate on what is said – the argument – rather than who is saying it.
- Take one thing at a time: jumping ahead, especially if you do so on the basis of assumption, can cause problems.
- Avoid negative reactions: certainly initially; hear the comment out and do not look horrified (even if you are!) ahead of working out how you intend to proceed.
- Make notes: do not trust your memory, jot down key points as the meeting proceeds (and, if you feel it is polite or necessary, ask permission to do so).

TIP: Listening is not just important to appraisal; it is a career skill, one that affects how you are perceived and is worth taking care with in many contexts.

Perhaps all this should go without saying, but it is easy to find yourself regarding an appraisal as a rather traumatic occasion, at least to some extent, and forgetting to handle things thoroughly.

5.3 The question of questions

There is no rule about the order here. Sometimes you will be asked questions or be on the receiving end of comments to which you must respond. But you may need to respond to such with a question – indeed there is often no reason why a question cannot be answered by a question – and there will be occasions during the meeting when you should lead in this way. Without clarification the alternative is to find you are off target and not talking about what is really required.

Remember questions you ask can all too easily turn out to be ambiguous (this is possible whoever puts them). This is something that leads us back to preparation. Part of the time before the meeting may usefully be spent not only thinking of what you might ask, but how you can put it clearly and succinctly. Some thought here is well worthwhile, as confusion can annoy and waste time.

Three types of question can be used:

- **Closed questions:** these are questions that can be answered easily with a quick “Yes” or “No”. As such they are most useful for checking facts and leading into deeper areas of investigation. But otherwise their use may be limited, especially when a fuller answer is sought.
- **Open questions:** these cannot be answered with a simple “Yes” or “No”. They are designed to get people talking, to elucidate real information and detail – they typically start with the words: what, why, when, where, how and who and with phrases such as “Tell me about...” (The latter may not technically be a question, but does get people talking).

The difference between these two approaches is marked. Ask “Will I be able to take on new things next year? (Or specify a particular area of work), and the answer may well be “Yes”. But if the conversation then moves on, there is little you have really discovered. When will a new involvement start? How will it be initiated? What will it involve? And so on. However ask, “Tell me something about any new involvements you see me taking on next year” and the subsequent conversation may explain much more.

- **Probing questions:** sometimes even an open question does not produce everything you want. Then you need to be prepared to pursue a point, asking a series of questions to focus on a particular area and get to the required level of detail. Phrases like “Tell me *more* about...” or “Can you explain that further?” may make a good start.

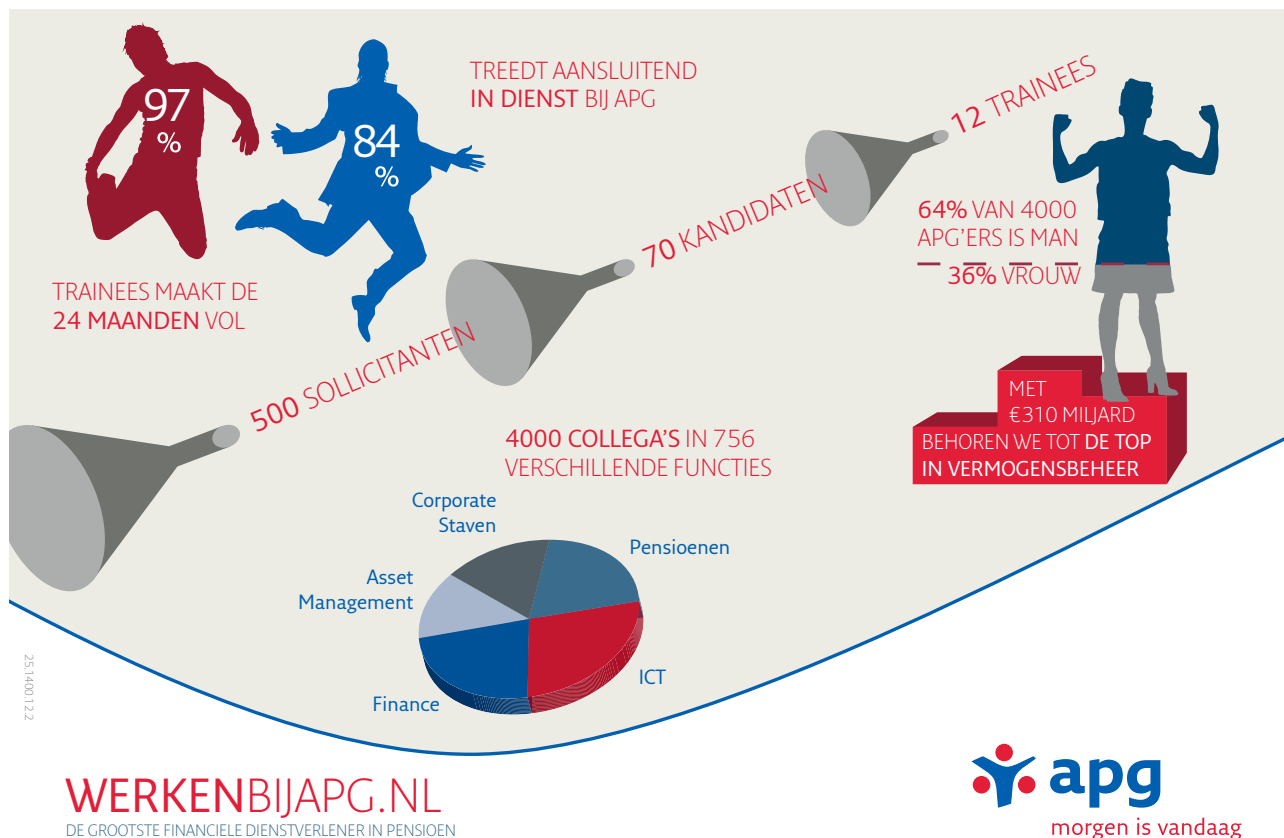
TIP: Questions are of major significance. You need to have good ones ready, and not be afraid to refer to them (“There were specific questions I wanted to ask about this, let me just check”); doing so is evidence of your being well prepared.

5.4 Your commentary

Performance reviews demand you comment on your work and performance; indeed it is a rule for those conducting such meeting that the appraisee – you – should be able to speak for the majority of the time. This is what your preparation should have addressed. Your objectives are perhaps to *maximise* the impressiveness of what you describe and *minimise* the significance of anything negative. You may, of course, receive some criticism – more of this later.

Key issues here are again common sense, you need to be:

- **Clear:** follow all the rules of good communication; do not go round the houses, beware of inappropriate jargon and get your point across succinctly. This may seem the simplest part of the proceedings, but it is worth some thought. Remember you probably know a good deal more about the details of your job than the appraiser. Remember too that clarity, especially where complexity is expected, impresses.
- **Descriptive:** is it sufficient to say you “made a plan”, or better to say what kind of plan it was – practical, excellent, creative (cunning? – maybe not)? And if it is a creative plan, maybe you should explain – describe – how. Use some well-chosen adjectives to support what you say. There is no reason why you cannot use some visual aids if they would help. Do not struggle to describe complex figures, for example, if one glance at a pie chart would allow your appraiser to see the point in a moment.



- **Seen to concentrate on implications and results:** do not just comment on *what* happened or was done; rather describe *how* it was done and especially what *came from it*. For instance, perhaps you saw to the production of a new corporate brochure. You can just mention this, or you can mention how it was produced, your copy writing skills, the deadline being hit or bettered, the way checking out several printers saved money, and the positive reaction expressed by customers about it – or even the business that has already resulted from it. All the later points can be chosen to link in with your agenda and objectives and how you want to put things over.
- **Providing proof:** where necessary do not just say what happened, but demonstrate it, documenting evidence or quoting figures where appropriate. Incidentally, figures which may often be used in evidence must always be quoted appropriately. It may be sufficient to say “the increase was around 10%”, but better to say “productivity went up 11.8%” (and never say “about 10.7%”, the juxtaposition of the word about and a precise figure just does not work).

5.5 The right reaction to criticism

Poorly conducted appraisals will often focus almost exclusively on the things that have gone less than perfectly. At worst the conversation then deteriorates into an argument and as things are banged to and fro nothing very much is achieved. And as William Ruckelshaus said: *The best way to win an argument is to begin by being right!*

However any appraisal is going to spend some time on difficulties – it goes with the territory so to speak – and you must be ready to deal with this. Three intentions should be uppermost in your mind in this respect, over and above a general desire to put the best complexion on everything. These are:

- **Achieving accuracy:** here your intention is to ensure that the right facts are considered. Beware of the appraiser using vague statements like “You’re never on time with anything”. This is unlikely to be true. But what are you late with and what are the implications? It is easier to discuss specifics and questions may well be the route to identify them.

Never argue with anything but the true facts, checking what is really meant is the first step to responding to what is said in the right way.

- **Being seen to be objective:** if every criticism is seen simply to put you into automatic defensive mode, then discussion will be unlikely to be constructive. Using an acknowledgement to position what follows is always useful. It:
 - indicates you feel there is a point to discuss (if you do not, then we are back to achieving accuracy – see above)
 - shows that you are not going to argue unconstructively
 - makes it clear that you intend to respond in a serious and considered fashion
 - gives you a moment to think (which may be very useful!) and sets up the subsequent discussion so that you can handle it better.

Just a few words may be all that is necessary here. Starting with a “yes” gives it power – *Yes, there was a problem with that* – and sounds right even if your intention is to go on to minimise the problem.

- **Dealing with the points raised:** now the job is to deal with the matter. Mechanistically the options are few and therefore manageable. You may need to explain why a difficulty occurred, then there are four routes to handling things:
 1. *Remove the difficulty:* if possible, you can explain that what seemed like a difficulty or error was not in fact that. A delay, say, might not have been in an original plan, but caused little problem.
 2. *Reduce the difficulty:* maybe you have to acknowledge that there was some difficulty, but explain that it was of little significance
 3. *Turn the difficulty into a plus:* sometimes it is possible to argue that what might initially seem like a problem is in fact not. A delay might not have been in an original plan, but included for a positive reason – there might only have been a real problem *without* the delay.
 4. *Agree the difficulty:* after all, there is no point in trying to argue that black is white. Most ordinary mortals have some problems during a whole year of activity. Your job is not to persuade the appraiser that there were *no* problems, but to persuade the appraiser that, on balance, your year was a good one.



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TIP: Remember that the prime purpose of appraisal is to set the scene for successful work in the *coming* year, not argue about what cannot be changed. None of us can turn the clock back, but all of us can learn from experience. So the key thing to include when the discussion touches on difficulties, is the lessons that have been learned for the future.

The list of implications and actions here is considerable. Failure may have come about because of unforeseen circumstances (and new procedures are necessary in case such circumstances occur again). You may be starting to have to use skills not previously necessary in the job (and training may be needed to quickly add them to your portfolio). You may have made a simple slip (and only need to make a firm mental note not to let it happen again). There may be lessons to learn, but ultimately the emphasis needs to be on what happens next, and this allows a return to the most constructive elements of the dialogue.

TIP: If there is one area that needs particular preparation it is in your response to criticism. You will surely know what is likely to be raised: be ready for such topics and have a constructive response ready.

It is possible, of course, that sometimes there are real problems. If you have made gross errors you may find that your appraisal overlaps into a discipline procedure. Similarly, your appraisal may be the first occasion on which you raise matters such as discrimination that is, in turn, linked to employment legislation. The details of both discipline procedures and of complex employment law are beyond the scope of this short text; if necessity arises do investigate them separately.

As a final point here: remember that the constructive approach commended as a response to criticism is something that can be usefully deployed in many ways, formally and informally.

5.6 Targeted results

When considering results it should be recognised that in any particular job some targets may well be sacrosanct. They may also link directly and automatically to the way you are rated, and indeed paid. Fail to hit a sales target, say, or a particular level of productivity and specific sanctions may cut in. Again the conclusion may be only that this goes with the territory. Appraisals take a view of the job as it is and judge performance accordingly.

It may be that circumstances or events lead to conclusions being drawn, or action decided upon, that change some of the seemingly fixed parameters. In this case documentation, for instance an amendment to the written job description, may be necessary.

5.7 Ratings

Where appropriate, ratings used for formal measurement during appraisal may need noting (perhaps completing a form) as the appraisal proceeds; alternatively this may be done at the end of the meeting. Some of these may be linked to targets and, as such, can be pre-judged; i.e. a failure to hit a target is known in advance of the meeting and thus the outcome is known too. Essentially though the judgments should be made *during* the meeting and, as it may not be known *why* something occurred, the discussion is needed to allow a fair judgment to be made.

5.8 Search for opportunities

Throughout the process, always be on the lookout for opportunities. Circumstances and attitudes that come to light during the meeting may create a new view of something. A new involvement may come out of a project handled during the year that seemed only a distraction. Yet, well handled, it throws up discussions about capabilities that you have displayed, which would not otherwise have been seen. And this in turn allows discussion to investigate new paths for the future.

Sometimes you can spot and lead into such a discussion. Sometimes the appraiser does so, maybe incorporating information you knew nothing of beforehand. In the latter case you have to be sure you see what is happening and link it to your own aims and objectives.

5.9 Action plans

Every appraisal meeting benefits from a clear summary. You may be asked to do this or to comment and add to the appraiser's summary. At this stage, ratings apart, one of the most important issues to be clear about is the definition of any action plans that are being put together.

Such plans may be specific and firm – you are to commence sitting on a management committee from their meeting on 15 December, say. Or they may be an initial idea that needs following up. In the latter case all that can be made specific is the arrangements for a further meeting to investigate further or tie things down. On some topics, it may be a better outcome for you to have an additional and separate meeting set, than to insist on lengthy discussion at the time that disrupts the agenda and timing for the whole appraisal.

5.10 Keep calm

Whatever happens, and sometimes appraisal meetings do get a little emotional, *always keep your cool*. Never overreact. Certainly you can, on occasion, be assertive – probably your appraiser expects no less. You must have the courage of your convictions about things, but your image will suffer if you get angry or upset where this is inappropriate. If necessary take a deep breath and never be afraid to say “Perhaps I may think about that for a moment” as you collect your thoughts. What is wanted are your considered views, not rash outbursts.

5.11 Concluding the meeting

So, at the end of the session you can leave the meeting with:

- A constructive discussion behind you
- Ratings agreed and documented
- A development plan updated
- Some lessons learned and noted
- Plans laid and dates set for the coming period
- And maybe, with additional time scheduled for further discussions of specific issues. Indeed, ensuring that this happens is a prime career building activity.

Whatever else, and however good or bad the appraisal might have been, you can leave with a personal profile that is positive in a number of ways, for example in your:

- Attitude to the appraisal
- Conduct and constructive attitude during it
- Willingness to accept constructive criticism and learn from it
- Ability to identify and focus on the key results areas
- Likelihood of being able to deliver a good performance next year.

All over? Forget about it all until the same time next year? No, there is just a little more to be considered if you are going to maximise any advantage that you can obtain from your appraisal.

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6 After the meeting

Phew! The meeting is over. Maybe it was not as daunting as you thought it would be. Maybe it went well. However it may have turned out, there is a temptation to heave a sigh of relief, put the whole thing on one side and get on with the job. To do so is almost certainly a mistake. There is more to do, and consideration of this is worth a moment's thought. Action is the order of the day.

6.1 The appraisal cycle

Practical action logically follows an appraisal meeting, but first consider the cycle of events of which appraisal is part. The cycle of action necessary to ensure ongoing good performance flows as follows:

- **Job definition:** the first task is to define the job in terms of its objectives and tasks and any attendant matters: the relationships it involves, the boundaries and overlaps with other jobs etc.
- **Capabilities definition:** this defines the knowledge, skills and attitudes that it is necessary for someone to have to be able to do justice to the job
- **Assessment of the *actual* level of capabilities:** in other words the level of knowledge, skills and attitudes that an individual has currently
- **Identify changes:** additional or extended knowledge, skills and attitudes that the job may demand looking ahead to what it will involve in future
- **Set developmental objectives:** decide what action may be necessary to close any gap between the existing level of capabilities and what is actually needed
- **Set priorities:** decide what must be done first, second and so on
- **Implement development activities:** carry out the planned activity
- **Evaluate progress:** check how things are developing and link back to the job definition and requirements.

The list above describes a continuous cycle of activity, indeed it may link back to a formal revision of your job description. Some of it is formal. The definition of the job, for instance, can result in a formal job description being issued. Some of it is informal, with development activity and evaluation both being made up, in part, of activity that is blended in with the ongoing job and with the regular dialogue between a manager and those they supervise.

The annual job appraisal (or indeed any additional scheduled meetings) is simply one part of this continuum. This view may help make the meeting seem a more routine and less exceptional activity. It also shows the necessity for follow up action. Appraisal is not something that happens in isolation. It is part of a continuum and a catalyst to the whole process. Appraisal is concerned ultimately with prompting future performance and helping make it achieve results. So too are the actions that spring from it.

6.2 Completing the system element

Consider something simple first: always complete any forms that link to appraisal promptly. First to comply with the system; it is a pity to blot your copybook as it were by missing the first deadline you have to hit after your appraisal meeting. Secondly, remember that if you do not deal with this sort of thing promptly your ability to recall salient details drops away fast (as anyone who has to compile minutes for meetings knows similarly). The details matter and you want there to be a clear record of what transpired.

Should there be documents mentioned that will be sent to you by the appraiser, always ask when you will receive them. If there is good to come from this you want it coming promptly and not being left in limbo. File all documentation back with your appraisal collection file; the first actions to help make next year's appraisal go well, take place immediately after this year's meeting.

6.3 Link to your work system

Otherwise there may be a number of decisions and intentions to take further. You may have agreed to:

- Check out suitable courses on some skill area and make suggestions as to what you should attend
- Provide additional background information about the past
- Take on new responsibilities that need briefing meetings to be set up
- Review targets or objectives more frequently in future, or for a period.

These and many more possible actions may need linking to your diary, confirming in memos and remembering for the future. Remember that if the manager who appraises you has numbers of people reporting to them, then they may collect a long list of follow up actions. A suggestion that you document things where appropriate may make sure that it is remembered and that action follows sooner rather than later.

Some actions may be things you want to get out of the way, like a further check on some aspect of your work that was questioned. Other actions may be things about which you are enthusiastic – they lead on the new chances or challenges. Follow both up as certainly and maintain a positive attitude about the whole process.

TIP: Remember feedback from you conditions future events. Say you obtain agreement to some form of training at your appraisal. You are keen to undertake it, follow up, schedule attendance on a course of some sort, and duly attend. If doing so is successful let your manager know – including a “thank you” if appropriate – and link it back to the ongoing tasks. If it was not the right thing, say so. You may need to go on something else and others may be protected from a similar waste of time.

TIP: Finally here let’s emphasise: there is always action of some sort to be taken after an appraisal, some immediate, some longer term. Never sideline this; deal with matters promptly to get the best from the event.

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7 Summary: the future

There is an old saying that Rome was not built in a day. And appraisals do not act to solve all problems and kick start our progress, guaranteeing effortless generation of future results and rewards to match. But appraisals should be a constructive part of the continuity of consideration and action that links what we do now to the dynamic nature of the environment in which we work, and give us some hope of keeping up.

The appraisal meeting can be a significant part of the process. It will not automatically go well. Some systems are inflexible, inappropriate or ill thought out. Some managers regard the whole thing as a chore. Some aspects of corporate bureaucracy act to dilute the effectiveness of appraisals, maybe by focusing artificially on unconstructive aspects of them and forgetting the main purpose. Both appraisers and appraisees contribute to the process and either can act to ensure that it is constructive rather than irrelevant and time wasting.

If you play your part – working at it from one appraisal to the next – then you stimulate the process in the right direction. Small actions can make a significant difference, with just one extra well-considered question taking the discussion into a new, helpful and relevant area. You have a good deal to gain; never let any aspect of your appraisal go by default.

Let's end this review of appraisal as it started by taking a strictly realistic view of the work environment. As has been said, the work environment is, in a word, dynamic. Recent years have seen much change: for example jobs for life are a thing of the past and waiting for things to “return to normal”, some vision of more secure times, is simply not one of the options. Few, if any, people are paid just for turning up. All of us, at whatever level of the organisational hierarchy we work, are judged by results (if no one downloads this book, I am unlikely to be asked to do more in the series!). That is fair – results are what we are there to achieve.

It is also reasonable that managers should want to know how people are doing and that they should seek to improve their performance. Individually most of us want that too. Job satisfaction comes, in large part, from a sense of achievement and we must know what, and how much, we are achieving. So appraisal is a practical tool in the management process. And ultimately its prime purpose is to increase the likelihood of *future* performance being satisfactory – better still of it qualifying as excellent.

Because you can get very close to what you do, the appraisal meeting represents a useful opportunity to step back and realistically review how things are going, and to look ahead and plan how things can be made to go well in future. This is true of both the immediate job and how that reflects your longer term career intentions. Essentially, for those being appraised there are two key areas where appraisal can help, by:

- Maximising existing and future job performance
- Playing a part in longer-term career planning and development (so the final check for you afterwards perhaps links to your career plan).

The two are clearly closely related. Careers tend not to prosper if performance in the current job is suspect. So any help that appraisal can give is to be welcomed in both respects. What did the old Beatles' song say? *I get by with a little help from my friends*. No one succeeds in a corporate environment entirely by his or her own efforts. Most of us benefit from a variety of advice, information and assistance along the way that comes to us, wittingly or unwittingly given, from those with whom we work.

Appraisals – both the formal and informal elements of it – should be seen in that light. Of course, there is an element of “checking up” about the process, but it is – or should be – constructive, and a process that looks to the future. Ignore it or treat it lightly at your peril. See it as a resource that is part of what can help you succeed in job and career and then take an active view of getting the most from it; you will be able to make it do more for you.



“I studied English for 16 years but...
...I finally learned to speak it in just six lessons”
Jane, Chinese architect

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The checklist below acts to sum up the key issues.

Example: taking a constructive approach to your appraisal

Specifically, you need to set yourself objectives under a number of headings:

- Planning how to make positive points about performance during the period under review
- Being ready to respond to points raised, including negative ones, appropriately
- Projecting the right image
- Reviewing specific work plans for the next period ahead
- Reviewing factors on which success in the future depends
- Identifying the need or desirability for training and development
- Looking ahead to longer term career development
- Linking discussion to salary and benefits review.

The key to getting the most from appraisals can be summarised in ten key points, as follows:

1. Take appraisal seriously (it is a luxury to be able to step back and think about what you are doing).
2. View it constructively – focus on what you (and your organisation) can gain from it.
3. Study and become familiar with the system your organisation uses.
4. Keep appraisals in mind during the year and gather the facts and information that will help your next one.
5. Prepare thoroughly for the meeting, thinking of what you want to discuss and anticipating what will be raised.
6. Aim to play an active part in the meeting, rather than simply be led by events.
7. Put your points over clearly and positively.
8. Ask anything where you feel comment or information would be helpful.
9. Record and action points agreed during the meeting (and be sure to hit any deadlines for action agreed).
10. Be open in discussion, constructive about criticism, positive about opportunities for the future and always receptive to new ways of doing things and new things you might do.

Though all appraisals may have to address strengths and weaknesses of performance, one that is simply unconstructive and from which nothing useful flows is just a waste of time. Company systems may demand that appraisals are gone through, perhaps for reasons of employment legislation, but if they are going to be done then the best should be got from them. Of course this is dependent on both you and management; but make sure you play your part in making it constructive.

Finally here, always keep your career plan firmly in mind throughout the process.

At the end of the day everyone wants to be successful. It is an old, but wise, maxim that there is a significant difference between five years' experience and one year's experience repeated five times. Ensuring that you are on the path towards five years' experience, and that your experience, competence, success – and thus your role – all grow, is a process that needs regular time and attention.

One repeating part of this process is your regular job appraisals: that is the annual appraisal and all the things that flow from it. Make the most of them and they can play a significant and positive part in your career progress and success. Let's end with another old saying, to be born in mind by anyone seeking career success:

“If you want to do something you find a way. If you don't want to do anything you find an excuse”
Arab proverb