

Business & Careers

Review your annual performance review



David Namkung
The Headhunter

For many managers and employees alike, annual performance review season is the most loathed and anxiety-provoking time of the year. In addition to the massive amount of time managers spend on the process, even high-performing employees who receive overall positive reviews are often unintentionally left deflated based on how the review is delivered.

It should come as no surprise, then, that leading global businesses have started to recognize some of the major shortfalls of the traditional review and the need to evolve this practice: annual reviews are highly impacted by cognitive biases, do not provide fluid or

immediate feedback, and are typically top-down and one-directional.

Deloitte and Accenture, two of the leading business consulting firms in the world, recently decided to eliminate their once-a-year performance reviews owing to such inefficiencies and have radically altered their approach to performance management.

As described in "Reinventing Performance Management" in the *Harvard Business Review*, Deloitte concluded that they were spending nearly two million hours globally on their annual reviews.

Within law firms, the traditional annual review is still widely used, and while it may generally work fine within your organization, it is key to recognize the potential limitations of your approach and adapt them to best serve your firm.

Acknowledge cognitive biases

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nitive bias coined "the Idiosyncratic Rater Effect," which has been repeatedly documented in academic journals, explains that a manager's rating of an employee more often hinges on the evaluator's sense of self than on the employee's actual performance.

Accordingly, when managers are asked to evaluate their staff based on certain qualities such as "potential" or "work ethic," instead of adopting objective standards relative to the requirements of the job, managers regularly bias towards their own standards skewed by how they personally identify with each performance metric.

Likely, you have already witnessed this in your own law firm—associates who work across specialty groups often receive wildly differing reviews.

Some partners place emphasis on impeccable work product, whereas others care more about high work volume or client feedback.

Instead of asking supervisors to rate associates on subjective factors, Deloitte's study found that consistency and objectivity in responses significantly rises when managers are asked to describe, with justifications, how they would act in response to an associate's performance.

Thus, Deloitte's appraisal model now focuses managers on four results-driven questions, which are asked after every major project:

- Would I award this person the highest possible compensation increase and bonus?;
- Would I always want him or her on my team?;
- Is this person at risk for low performance?; and
- Is this person ready for a promotion today?

Most firms spend the vast majority of their time and resources trying to receive exhaustive feedback from all relevant stakeholders that has to then be formulated, synthesized and interpreted to action items. By cutting to the chase, your firm can save time while gaining directly applicable results.

Avoid surprises and stale feedback

Perhaps the most significant shortfall of the annual performance review is that, true to its name, it is not a fluid and ongoing process. A few months before annual reviews, partners are sent a questionnaire about their associates, which is typically left untouched in their inbox until they are finally chased down by their professional development director.

Clearly, this is not an ideal feedback mechanism, since it doesn't encourage kudos or

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Input: Be sure to follow through on feedback

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concerns to be communicated in real-time. This can be particularly destructive breeding ground for resentment, when partners include critiques in the written review that have never been relayed in person.

For example, imagine that you are a rising-star-partner-track associate who recently volunteered to cancel a vacation to pull all-nighters in assisting a partner with a new client.

The deal closes smoothly and you receive exceptional feedback from the client who continues to work with you. For your review, however, the only comment on the file is a criticism about arriving five minutes late to prepare for a conference call scheduled another 30 minutes later.

This is the first time you've heard mention of this event that occurred months ago, and there is no other recognition of your efforts in the review. Unfortunately, this is the kind of scenario that happens much too often. Associates are left feeling sand-bagged by their partners, which can seriously erode the associate's trust in them.

Consequently, Deloitte and Accenture have

both moved towards ongoing feedback processes and are experimenting with technological solutions to provide current feedback to associates on a project-by-project basis.

Even if your firm elects to continue with the annual review, consider options for incentives to your partners to regularly provide feedback, ideally on a face-to-face basis, so that associates can gain a better understanding of expectations and have a timely opportunity to adapt to them.

Turn the tables

The top-down model of performance appraisals commonly used in law firms is becoming increasingly antiquated as leading employers are recognizing the importance of using reviews not only to give feedback, but also to seek it.

The performance review should be much more than a one-way process, because while financial rewards and promotions are important incentives, at the end of the day, they are not the ultimate drivers of performance.

As explained by best-selling author

Daniel Pink, employees are primarily inspired by three variables: autonomy (the desire to direct our own lives), mastery (the urge to continually learn and improve), and purpose (the desire to do something that matters).

A vice-president of a global technology company who has over 80 reporting staff, explained to me that he regularly asks each of his reporting staff how they would rate their jobs (1-10) on each of these variables.

Due to this practice, he has not had a single unexpected departure from his team and has in fact been able to proactively help certain staff move to more suitable internal and external roles.

How does your firm listen to its associates and what substantive questions do you ask in your feedback process? Instead of assuming that your associates simply want more money and the chance at partnership, be sure to ask your associates about the factors that might truly engage them.

Is it time for your annual performance review to go through its own review? Performance reviews can either galvanize associates towards a common purpose, which

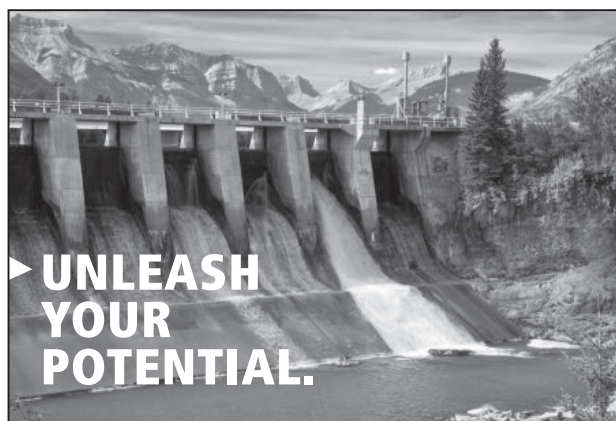
ultimately inspires loyalty and better performance, or they can leave them feeling unheard and underappreciated.

Even if your firm isn't ready to overhaul its entire review process like Accenture or Deloitte, if you are involved in managing your firm's review it may be helpful to first start by seeking feedback and input from those giving or receiving feedback to gauge how your process is perceived internally.

Your annual review may already be optimized for your organization but you will likely get more out of your process by focusing on results-driven questions, implementing ongoing mechanisms for feedback, and expanding the review to allow a two-way street.

Most importantly, with the feedback you gain from both partners and associates, follow through.

David Namkung is a partner with The Counsel Network in Vancouver, vice-president of the Federation of Asian Canadian Lawyers (BC Chapter) and board member/volunteer of WorkingGear.ca. You can follow him on Twitter @DNamkung



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