



Appraisals are dead, long live continuous feedback!

A guide to better performance
reviews for law firms

[Putting appraisals under review](#)

[Feedback on tap](#)

[Making continuous feedback work](#)

[Getting partner buy-in](#)

[Are appraisals dead?](#)

Putting appraisals under review

Annual appraisals don't work. On some level, everyone in HR knows this. Particularly in a law firm, the preparation alone can be the work of a day or two – and that's if there is even a record of previous reviews. All too often, notes from last year's appraisal are hard to find, inaccurate or forgotten entirely.

On the whole, the process is laborious, unhelpful and in some instances demotivating or perceived as unfair by the lawyer. How can a review of their progress once a year legitimately address their professional development in line with the firm's overall strategy? The truth is, it can't.

Feedback on tap

If annual appraisals don't work then what should law firms do to support employee development? One of the key flaws with annual appraisals is that they only come around once a year so people behave as if this is the only time they can give or request feedback. Introducing a process of regular feedback outside of formal appraisals is paramount.

Getting feedback on how you're performing should not be an annual event. Instead, feedback should be timely and continuous to ensure ongoing support and development. With this approach you can:

- **Generate greater returns.** Companies that set quarterly performance goals generate almost a third greater return from their performance process.
- **Build teamwork and trust.** The act of giving regular feedback should encourage people to actively seek feedback, and vice versa. This generates a closer, more productive working environment. You can address problems before they fester and you can recognise and celebrate positive contributions in a timely, meaningful way.

- **Reduce stress and anxiety.** One large appraisal at the end of the year can be a daunting experience. By providing smaller, more regular feedback sessions throughout the year, it becomes a matter of routine. This embeds the process into the firm's culture. With notes from regular meetings, annual reviews become more productive, accurate and far less stressful.
- **Engage employees.** Engaged and enabled employees are 50 percent more likely to outperform expectations. They are also less likely to leave, sparing the firm costly, time-consuming turnover.



Making continuous feedback work

Even with the best of intentions, it's hard to make something work without a process to follow. Bringing continuous feedback into your review process need not be overly complicated and will ultimately reduce the time needed for an annual review. The key to making continuous feedback work within your firm is ensuring it's easy for people to integrate into their day-to-day by using the right tools and keeping it simple.

1

Make feedback a daily habit

You should seek to address actions, both good and bad, as they happen. For this to be feasible, people need an easy way to give and receive feedback. Though generally quite quick, face-to-face and email communication isn't always ideal.

Some Human Resource Information Systems (HRIS) may have functionality for delivering feedback but these tools typically lack any direct connection to a person's day-to-day work, are clunky and can be seen as too formal. If the system isn't simple enough to access every day, then no one will bother with it.

2

Set up regular conversations to review goals

These conversations don't have to be formal and they can be as brief as a check-in over coffee. The key is having access to the right information, such as goals and progress, to steer the conversation and make it productive. If people feel they have to spend too much time preparing for a review then it simply won't happen.

3

Get a system to monitor progress

Emails back and forth, handwritten feedback on a form or simply a verbal discussion are all hard to refer back to unless both parties are very well organised. Having a system in place to track and monitor progress, including the ability to flag concerns before they impact success, means you have a way to easily bring this valuable information into the annual review process.



4

Make feedback accessible

Goals, feedback and progress should become part of your day-to-day. If they are out of sight they are out of mind so it's useful to store important information in a place that is accessible by the reviewer and the reviewee.

5

Share feedback with the right people

In some circumstances, it might just be the individual who needs to hear certain feedback. Generally, though, it is advisable to also share this with the individual's line manager so they can reward good work and address concerns.

6

Identify areas for development

There is little use tracking progress regularly if the feedback won't be used to identify areas for further development or a skills gap. It's important to consider how you will draw this out within your review process.

Where do your development needs and competency models currently sit? How would they be informed by feedback? Is there a way for someone giving feedback to note that it is relevant to a particular competency area?

7

Feedback on areas the person can change

The process of continuous feedback should be about empowering the person to do more of what is working and to address what isn't. For them to do this, you need to know beforehand what they are trying to achieve and how that aligns with the wider goals of the firm. With this information, you can tailor feedback to help someone confidently work towards actionable goals.

8

Address and carefully manage negative feedback

Sometimes negative feedback has to go directly to the individual and sometimes it should go to their manager first. Either way, it's important that the feedback is given in a manner that allows the individual to act on it and change their behaviour, without damaging confidence, trust or morale.

9

Incorporate continuous feedback into annual compensation reviews

Pragmatically, a firm will address compensation annually so there will inevitably be some form of annual appraisal even for the most enlightened firms that have embedded continuous feedback. The key is to bring real-time feedback given throughout the year into the appraisal discussion and use that to fairly and logically inform compensation decisions.

Getting partner buy-in

It's no secret that partners aren't always inclined towards people management, whether that's due to time constraints, client pressures or personal preference. Lawyers can be individualistic and competitive by nature so ensuring partners understand the value of regular feedback, to the firm and to them, is essential.

The main argument against ongoing performance reviews is that they take up time that could otherwise be spent on client work or business development. While this may be true if the grind of annual appraisals were repeated every month, continuous feedback can take as little as a few minutes with the right process and system in place.

In return for those few minutes, associates can gain a better understanding of how to draft a brief, communicate with a tricky client or tackle a complex issue. Ultimately, this translates into happier clients and more revenue.

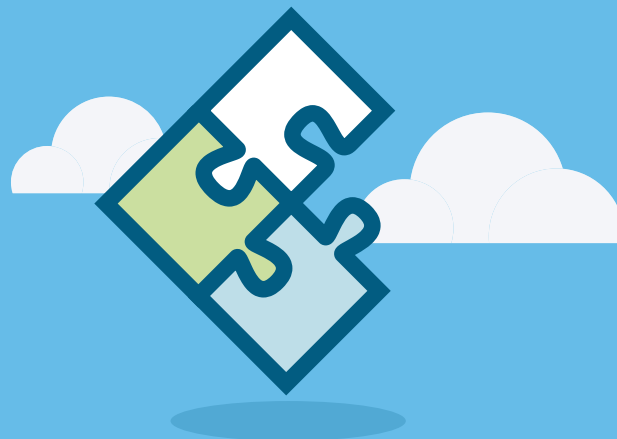
Furthermore, when the annual appraisals do come around, partners will have a year's worth of feedback and progress reports to look back on and address. Both the partner and the associate are in a much more informed position to evaluate performance and set relevant, achievable objectives for the coming year.

Are appraisals dead?

Appraisals as we know them – annual, arduous and time-consuming – are failing law firms. They don't promote success or growth but instead just put people off talking about performance and better professional development.

Continuous feedback, when done right, is proven

to build trust, increase efficiency and boost productivity. In reality, most law firms will continue to use some form of annual review – especially for addressing partner remuneration. What needs to change, however, is how well informed they are by the time that review comes around.



About ObjectiveManager

At ObjectiveManager, we have developed goal-setting software to help professional services firms and their employees define strategy, improve performance through feedback and power growth.

By simplifying the way firms conduct strategic planning, we help them improve collaboration and optimise conditions for growth. Our innovative software turns individual gains into big business impact by making individual and firm-wide objectives visible, constant and actionable.

Learn More

Contact us to see a full demonstration of the powerful capabilities in ObjectiveManager and see how it can help you manage and grow your firm.
www.objectivemanager.com | enquiries@objectivemanager.com

