

# Performance Evaluations: Friend or Foe?

Your annual review can be a road map to career success. It all depends on how you use it.

■ By Patricia A. Garcia,  
Certified PLS

**A**nother year has gone by, and your firm's personnel department is busy handing out evaluation forms again. Do you break out in a cold sweat, wondering each time your boss calls you into his or her office if this is it—the moment when you're going to find out what they *really* think of you?

Maybe you don't realize just how important an annual review can be. Personally, I'm convinced the job performance evaluation form is one of the most valuable tools available for the career legal secretary/assistant.

## A Telescopic View

The first written evaluation I received was from my fourth employer, a large law firm with a staff of over 100 people. I had previously worked for a small firm of four attorneys, and if I received any review at all, it was something as simple as, "You're doing fine."

I had been told by my new firm's personnel supervisor to expect an

evaluation at the end of an initial 90-day probation period, but I was not prepared for a 2-page printed form covering 33 numbered "Characteristics & Abilities," rated from 1 to 5, in addition to scores for speed, accuracy, and neatness in technical skills such as typing and shorthand, plus a review of my strengths, weaknesses, and goals!

When it came time to discuss the evaluation with my boss, I told him that I was concerned about how the firm could make constructive use of these forms since each attorney surely had a different opinion of what an "average" performance was, probably based on former secretaries.

## Who Benefits?

We spent a great deal of time discussing the evaluation process, and he helped me to understand that aside from whatever uses the firm might have for the evaluation forms, I had to set my own standards and take the

responsibility for the development and advancement of my career as a legal secretary/assistant. He told me what he expected from his secretary and then reviewed my overall performance—which turned out to be "satisfactory."

Of course, I thought I was at least a little above average, but knew I couldn't just tell him that; I would have to convince him with actions. I took the evaluation form home and went over it, line by line. I then thought about my past jobs, what my duties had been, how I had measured up, and how some things had changed and others had not.

## Goal Setting

I realized then that a job performance evaluation is much more valuable to the employee than it is to any personnel supervisor. I carefully considered the position I held in the legal field at that time, and set goals for where I wanted to be in a year, and for a few years after that.

I was fortunate to have a boss who gave me feedback on my performance on a regular basis, and he was supportive and encouraging. I began to look forward to my annual evaluations, because they helped me focus on my long-term goals and mapped the progress I was making.

I worked on the areas that needed improvement, and gained confidence in myself because I also knew my



## Performance Evaluations

strengths. The evaluation form was my report card, and I wanted to graduate some day to something.

Every year I would look at my growth and discuss my goals with my boss. I continued to assume additional duties and improved my weak areas. In 1983 I proudly received certification as a Professional Legal Secretary; two years later, I successful-

ly completed the Certified Legal Assistant examination and was awarded the designation "CLA."

The time came when I was no longer satisfied with the direction of my career, and I took on a new challenge; I started my own free-lance service. I am convinced that the use of those job performance evaluation forms enabled me to actually see what

I wanted to do, where I wanted to go, and then do something about it. In fact, I now ask my clients to complete an evaluation on nearly every project I handle.

## Take Inventory

If you are not satisfied in your present position, for whatever reasons, a careful review of your performance and setting of goals is essential to your well-being. Consider first the following: Do you possess the necessary skills to do this job? Do you understand what is expected of you in this position? Do you have an effective relationship with your boss, the other attorneys, and support staff?

Then review your actual performance: What are your strong points, or greatest assets? What areas of your job would you like most to improve? Are your capabilities being utilized fully? What duties could be performed more efficiently if delegated to someone else? What additional duties could you assume, or do you want to assume?

Write the answers down on a piece of paper. Be honest with yourself, give yourself credit when it is due, and admit your weaknesses.

## The Bottom Line

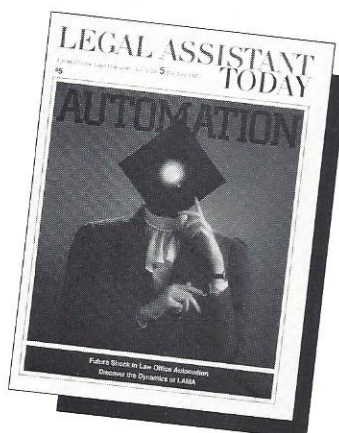
Once you have completed this self-appraisal, you will be ready for a discussion with your boss or personnel supervisor. Explain that it will help you do a better job to have their comments on your performance. Let them know that you are willing to make some changes if necessary, and tell him or her of your long-term goals. You may find that by making a few changes, you will be a lot happier and your job will be that much more rewarding.

Remember, you alone are responsible for the development of your career. Use a job performance evaluation to your advantage; it is more important than you may have thought.

Friend or foe? Friend, definitely. ■

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