Introduction

During a new employee’s probationary period, the line manager should follow a formal structured procedure that is aimed at assessing and reviewing the employee’s performance, capability and suitability for the role.

It will be the manager’s responsibility to structure the programme in such a way that both parties are clear about what to expect.

The programme should include:

- regular monitoring of the new employee’s performance through progress meetings;
- identification and discussion of any problem areas at the earliest possible time;
- the provision of regular constructive feedback;
- supervisory support and guidance; and
- the provision of any necessary training and coaching.

Although the HR department should be available to provide support and guidance where required throughout the programme, all these actions will be the responsibility of the new employee’s line manager.

A probationary period must be properly planned if it is to be effective. The programme also needs to be agreed with the new employee, who must be clear on what is expected of him or her. This information will include:

- clear job outputs, ie what the new employee is expected to achieve during, or by the end of, the probationary period;
- the standards of performance that are required in respect of the job duties;
- the standards or measurements against which the employee’s performance will be assessed;
- any agreed development activities; and
- a description of any relevant standards of behaviour, for example in relation to liaison with clients and colleagues.

If the employee is unclear about any of these areas, he or she may lack commitment to the programme.

Performance Development Plan

A probationary period will often include a training plan.

The idea of a training plan is to outline everything that the employee needs to learn in order to carry out the role effectively. A training plan might cover:

- specific job tasks;
• the organisation’s procedures on, for example, health and safety or the use of computers;
• general workplace practices;
• product and/or technical knowledge;
• Computer skills;
• Familiarisation with key colleagues/partners.

The training should be structured in stages in order to enable the employee to work towards competent performance by the end of the probationary period. Support that the employee can expect to receive from their line manager, will also be clearly laid out in the PDP, along with some timescales for monitoring, measuring and/or assessment and completion.

**Planning progress meetings**

Progress meetings should be planned and scheduled at the outset of the employee’s employment. It will be the line manager’s responsibility to ensure that all probationary reviews are completed on time.

At each meeting, the manager should aim to:

• highlight areas where the employee is doing well;
• explain clearly and in precise terms any areas in which the employee is falling below the required levels;
• explore the possible reasons for any failure to meet the required standards;
• discuss and agree whether or not any specific training or coaching is required;
• discuss any other relevant matters such as timekeeping, attendance, general conduct or attitude;
• invite the employee to comment on issues such as the extent to which he or she has integrated into the department and how well he or she is getting on with colleagues; and
• give the employee an opportunity to ask questions or raise concerns about any aspect of his or her employment.

It is important that the manager does not restrict the progress meetings to discussions of problem areas, but also identifies and comments on the positive outcomes that the new employee has achieved.

Managers should be prepared to provide all possible support to their new employees in order to give them a fair opportunity to become fully integrated and productive employees in the longer term.

**Communication skills required for a progress meeting**

If a progress meeting is to have a positive outcome, open, honest and unambiguous communication will be necessary.

The manager should:

• stick to facts and avoid expressing personal opinions, unless these are constructive and can be backed up by facts;
• be specific when identifying any shortfalls in performance;
• avoid generalisations such as “you never meet your deadlines” or “you’re doing OK”;
• ask open questions;
• listen actively to what the employee has to say and take it on board;
• ensure that the tone used is friendly rather than accusatory;
• use positive words such as “improvement” and “achievement”, rather than negative words such as “failure” or “weakness”; and
• check for understanding, for example by asking the employee to summarise his or her understanding of what has been discussed.
Keeping records

The content of progress meetings and the interim probationary review meeting should be fully and clearly documented on a probation review form. The form should provide an accurate record of what was discussed at the meeting, including any areas of concern, as well as a note of the areas in which the employee is performing well.

The probation review form should be completed and returned to the HR department and a copy provided to the employee. If there are any areas of disagreement over what should be recorded on the form, the manager should try to resolve these with the employee prior to the document being signed by both parties.

Final review

At the end of the probationary period, the manager should conduct a “formal probation review meetings” of the employee's performance and suitability for the job.

It is extremely important that the final review meeting is held on or before the end of the agreed probationary period. If the meeting does not take place by this date, technically the employee's appointment will be confirmed by default. This will mean that any subsequent dismissal on account of unsatisfactory performance will be harder for the employer to justify.

The final review will allow both the manager and the employee to:

- identify and discuss any areas in which the employee requires further training or development;
- check how the employee feels about his or her employment in general; and
- explain how performance will be managed in the future, for example through the employer’s formal appraisal system.

If the employee's performance is satisfactory, the manager - or HR department - should issue a letter of confirmation of appointment to the employee.

If the employee's performance has not been up to the standards required, the manager should discuss the matter with the HR department before any decision is made not to confirm the employee's appointment.

Extending probationary periods

If, at the end of the set probationary period, the employee's performance is unsatisfactory an extension of the probationary period may be appropriate to allow further time for the employee to meet the required standard.

An extension should normally be sought only where there are special circumstances justifying it. The manager should consult with HR prior to any decision to extend an employee's probationary period.

As an employee will gain the right to claim unfair dismissal after completion of the usual qualifying period of continuous service to bring a complaint of unfair dismissal, any extension of a probationary period should normally be for no more than three months.

Where it is agreed that an employee's period of probation will be extended, it will be important for the manager to set out the terms of the extension in writing. It will be important to state clearly:

- the length of the extension and the date on which the extended period of probation will end;
• the reason for the extension - for example that the employee's performance has fallen short of certain standards, but the manager reasonably believes that an extension of time will be effective in allowing him or her to achieve these standards;
• the performance standards or objectives that the employee is required to achieve by the end of the extended period of probation;
• any support - such as further training - that will be provided during the extension; and
• that if the employee does not meet fully the required standards by the end of the extended period of probation, his or her employment will be terminated.

It is not advisable to extend an employee's period of probation although this may be an option in certain circumstances, and depending on the length of the first extension? It is equally inadvisable to make extending probationary periods the norm. An extension should be agreed only if there are special factors that justify it.

Where an employee's probationary period is extended, written details of how and why performance has fallen short of the required standards should be attached to the terms of the extension.