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Smoothing the path to appraisals

THE LADDER
By VICTORIA GURVICH

EMployees should have a clear idea of what they want to get out of their performance appraisal, says Nick Deligiannis, senior regional director of Hays in Victoria.

Affirming employees was one of the key pieces of advice experts had for managers who conduct appraisals when The Ladder last week looked at ways leaders can help improve the appraisal process.

But, what do experts advise employees?

Russell Johnson, managing director of career management company EPR International, says: "Be prepared to help your manager." Appraisals, he says, are "not necessarily a happy process for them either".

Not only do most managers dislike doing them but many are also handicapped by having to work with ineffective appraisal systems, he says.

"Ask yourself how you can make this more

constructive," Mr Johnson says. "Avoid defensiveness, it gets you nowhere. Concentrate on what you can learn and improve... If possible, work with your manager to set quantifiable performance measures that will make your next appraisal easier and hopefully happier for all concerned."

He also recommends raising potential objectives for your professional development that would benefit the organisation.

MY RESUME

Helen Yandell, 52, was appointed director of the Springvale Monash Legal Service in March. It is directed by a board of management and funded by Monash University Law School and federal and state governments.

What does the SMLS do?
This community legal service has been here for more than 30 years. It provides free legal advice to anyone in the community who, for financial reasons or an inability to understand or deal with the legal system, is unable to seek legal advice elsewhere. We see people with a range of legal matters including motor vehicle accidents, family law, debt and credit, neighbour disputes, crime and victims of crime, and sometimes represent clients in court.

How has your job been so far?
It's been a huge learning curve because of the complexity of this service and its role with Monash University. My role is to oversee the professional practice unit of the law course. Students can do a semester unit at the legal service. They see clients, conduct files and do whatever's required, under the supervision of our lawyers. It's an optional unit of the law course and it's quite sought-after. The students are in their second-last or last year of law.

What else have you done?
I worked at the Western Suburbs Legal Service for nearly four years. That was my first role as a lawyer. Before that I worked for 25 years in education, largely with people with disabilities, or training people to

work in the disability sector. I then worked in adult education, largely with people from a non-English-speaking background who wanted to learn English. I taught subjects such as citizenship and an introduction to the legal system.

Why did you decide to study law?
I did it externally through Deakin University. It's something I'd always been interested in. Working with adults, I'd advocated for people with disabilities in matters such as consumer disputes, employment and housing issues in a non-legal capacity... That fired up my passion to study law.

Was it difficult studying law as a mature-age student?
Incredibly. And incredibly difficult by correspondence. I needed to discuss legal concepts and subject matter with people. But, like all correspondence students, you find like-minded people and set up study groups. I could email other students. And we had revision weekends at uni.

Did you know what you wanted to do once you'd finished?
I always wanted to work in the community. Initially I wanted to work with people with a disability but later decided I didn't want to specialise because there are so many areas of disadvantage.

Does your teaching background help in your job and what do you love about your new role?
Tremendously — understanding the principles of education and how

people learn, I think, is invaluable. I love the close connection to the community and being able to assist people first-hand. Community legal centres play an invaluable role in making the law more accessible and by being able to comment on the impact of laws on people in the community. We often advocate for changes in the law when they negatively impact on members of the community. The other bonus here is how eager and motivated the students are. Mine is a managerial role. I supervise students who see the clients. This is the only community legal service in Victoria where students run advice sessions and files.

We're quite unique. I think this is the perfect job for me... This legal service has a long history of students who have come through the centre doing amazing things in the law.



PICTURE: GARY MEDLICOTT



Nick Deligiannis, Russell Johnson and Jacquie Wise believe staff appraisals should be constructive.
PICTURES: EDDIE JIM, GARY MEDLICOTT, SIMON SCHLUTER

WORKWORDS



"Hide not your talents, they for use were made. What's a sundial in the shade?"

BENJAMIN FRANKLIN (1706-1790)

Mr Johnson says the focus should be on using and developing your strengths rather than on any weaknesses. Find ways you can use your strengths so they will be appreciated, he says.

"You'll never do your best being something you're not," he says, and suggests some workers could consider seeking professional career guidance. If the work environment is destructive to an employee's self-esteem, they should change it or it may be time to move on.

Ideally, appraisals should be discussions that are looked forward to, he says, and they are an opportunity to remind managers about your strengths and what you enjoy.

"Approach the appraisal process with thoughts and suggestions of your own."

Executive and performance coach Jacquie Wise says she has seen appraisal forms that are "abysmal, so badly designed". Some did not have enough room for substantiation of leaders' comments, and others did not have specific enough ratings, for example.

When it comes to performance appraisals, "employees worry about what they will be criticised on and if it will affect their relationship with their boss", she says,

adding that some managers even find it difficult to give compliments.

Ms Wise says employees should be well prepared and perhaps keep a file of examples of work they believe they have done well and about which managers may have forgotten. If there are areas in which an employee is experiencing problems, it's a good idea to approach this with honest explanations and ideas about how things could be done differently.

Think about your job, she says, and what you have done best and least well, what you require of management to help you perform better, and think about how you see your career developing.

Hays' Mr Deligiannis says: "Have a clear idea of what you want to get out of the appraisal and be prepared by having a clear understanding of your performance versus objectives."

He advises using examples of work collected throughout the year and "gain a commitment from your manager to lock in appropriate training, mentoring and development".

"Was last year's commitment delivered?" Ideally employees should leave the appraisal discussion with a clear indication of what

they need to achieve in order to progress in the organisation.

"For an employee who is low in confidence and self-esteem, it is a good idea to remember the reason companies have appraisals is to help people reach their potential, be the best they can be and make a bigger contribution. If they have that mind-set going into the appraisal they may find that they look forward to it and enjoy it. Preparation will also instil confidence," he says.

Farm vision

The Victorian Farmers Federation needs a chief executive. The successful applicant will work with the board to create a new vision for the organisation during a period of change.

Applicants should have governance and financial management experience in the government or not-for-profit sector. Phone Clare McCartin or Andrew Marty at SACS Consulting on 8622 8500.

Helping heart health

The Heart Foundation, whose mission it is to reduce the incidence of heart, stroke and blood vessel disease by increasing the use of proven treatments and promoting lifestyles that improve cardiovascular health, is on the hunt for a major gift/bequest leader.

Cardiovascular disease affects more than 3 million Australians and is the nation's



leading cause of death and a major source of disability.

An energetic people-person with a proven record in business development or fundraising is being sought to nurture relationships with supporters in the bequest and

major gift programs. Phone Kate Napier at SACS Consulting on 8622 8506 for details.

German assistance

Fluent in German — both written and spoken? If so, you may be interested in applying for an executive assistant role to a managing director of an international prestige brand.

Senior-level personal assistant or executive assistant experience is required and applicants need to be familiar with dealing with top-level management of a global organisation.

The office is in Mulgrave and a car park is provided.

Inquiries to Nicole Miller at Hays Office Support on 8562 4200 or nmill@hays.com.au.

Online business course

Keen to refresh your small business management skills but don't particularly like the idea of having to travel to study? The answer could be Swinburne TAFE's Graduate Certificate of Business (Small Business Management), which is now offered online, and the first such course starts next month.

The postgraduate course covers small business start-up and development, plus finance, management and operations and e-business systems and applications.

The course offers e-mentors who are teachers and specialists in their field and combine teaching with an industry position.

Co-ordinator Mary Louise O'Brien says the course has broad appeal, from people running or starting their own business to those working for large companies and managing work units.

It is offered on a part-time basis over 12 months and can also be studied on campus.

For details, email mobrien@swin.edu.au, phone 9214 8700 or visit swinburne.edu.au.

New York beckons

Adam Blackmore, 24, is the lucky winner of the MyCareer.com.au Dream Job competition that ran early this year.

Mr Blackmore, who works in the media in Sydney, won a trip to New York where he spent two days earlier this month learning how to be a television producer with Brave Street Productions, which has produced programs for US cable TV such as the Travel Channel and MTV.

More than 50,000 people entered the competition. Mr Blackmore could choose from six US experiences, including as a general manager of a Texas baseball team, a wardrobe stylist in Los Angeles, and a golf professional in California. His prize included return air fares, five nights' accommodation, and \$US1000 (\$A1350) spending money.

Send information for The Ladder to: vgurvich@theage.com.au