

How to Document Employee Performance

Tips for Knowing When, Why, How, and What to Document

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In the world of human resources and employment, [documentation about an employee's performance](#) can make or break your ability to [discipline](#), [terminate](#), or fairly [promote](#), reward, and [recognize employees](#).

Documentation is essential for managers and HR staff because you need to make a serious effort to record all of the events in the employment history of your employees—both positive and negative incidents of performance.

Here is why managers and HR staff will want to carefully document all happenings.

Why

- Documentation provides evidence that [performance issues were discussed](#) with the employee in a timely and concise fashion.
- Documentation offers a history of the [employee's improvement or failure to improve performance](#) over time. It is chronological and a precise description of the employee's actions, the manager's actions, and events as they occur.
- Documentation provides evidence that supports management decisions to take [unfavorable action such as discipline](#) or termination with an employee.
- Documentation offers proof that an employee deserves an available promotion or opportunity over other employees who are also eligible.
- Documentation provides evidence to justify [salary increases](#), decreases, or why an employee received no raise.
- In the event of a lawsuit, complete and thorough documentation protects an employer's interests. The documentation can support management's actions in [terminating an unsuccessful employee](#). It also can prove that the employee was terminated for reasons that are legal as opposed to others [such as illegal discrimination](#).

What

Managers need to document employee performance, both positive contributions and performance failures. They need to document exactly what the employee did and said and what the manager did and said in response during the meeting or conversation.

You need to document any agreements made during the conversation, [goals set](#), improvements required and expected, and the timeline for improvement. Documentation should also contain commitments that the manager makes to assist the employee.

How

Documentation should be written during or immediately following the meeting or conversation with the employee. At no time should you miss writing down the conversation on the day when it actually occurred. Waiting until later affects the quality of the documentation because it is based on memory.

One of the worst mistakes managers make is to believe that they can reconstruct an employee counseling history as needed. No HR person who has any experience of decent, timely documentation is ever fooled by a reconstructed record. Managers who reconstruct from memory bring unnecessary and unacceptable risk to their company because a made-up history won't hold up in a potential lawsuit.

You need your documentation to appear professional, neat, and organized. Write documentation as if you are talking about the history to a third party. You never know who may read your documentation one day, so make sure that it reflects your professionalism. (Back of a cocktail napkin, envelope, or sticky note doesn't qualify as professional documentation.)

Your documentation should go to an employee's new manager if the employee obtains a new job—or you do—in your organization. For your memory and to inform the employee's new manager, you need to put the employee's name and title, your name and title, and the full date on each document.

Write documentation that is factual, fair, legal, objective, complete, and consistent. Avoid opinions (Mike is sloppy. Alice is lazy. Tom was lying to me.), name-calling, editorializing (John

is a jerk. Mark has an attitude problem.) and labeling (Mary is irresponsible. George is not a team player.).

Avoid also trying to interpret the employee's behavior. (Marsha must not like this assignment. Paula appears to be in over her head.) Minimize your use of descriptive words such as adjectives and adverbs (slowly, sloppily, unhappy, moody, rude). State the employee's specific behavior and actions, not your opinion or interpretation of it.

In documentation, what is needed is an accurate record of the conversation. Stick with the facts and write down just what you said and what the employee said. Make sure that your documentation is unambiguous and that it gets the facts straight. (In any potential legal situation, errors in any of the documented events make all of the documentation suspect.)

Finally, document any agreements, commitments, timelines, improvements needed, check-in points, and other details that might slip from memory. Make certain that you set a date and time for deadlines and due dates so that misunderstanding won't occur.

Know your HR department's documentation policy, which will tell you what documentation needs placement in the [employee's personnel file](#) Any documentation of disciplinary actions should certainly be included.

Where

Since documentation about employees is confidential and private to the employee, you need to take care that any documentation remains confidential to the manager, HR, and potentially the employee's next manager. Thus, putting documentation on a shared computer drive is not recommended. Handwritten documentation and a manager's documentation printed out are best kept in locked storage.

If you follow these guidelines, when you go to HR to ask for help in disciplining, terminating, or transferring an employee to a job with [a better potential fit](#), HR will help you solve the problem or improve the situation. When HR tells you to document, document, document or they can't help you; you'll have all of your bases covered.