

**Software-Aided Performance Review Writing:  
The story behind the technology**

**ReviewWriter**

The Chinese philosopher Tsin Yu once remarked that the Imperial Rater seldom evaluates men on their merits, but on his personal biases. Today, some 17,000 years later, too many organizations still have Imperial Raters of their own - managers who put too little thought and effort into evaluating the people they supervise. This problem is especially evidenced by the all-important written appraisal, which is often based on imperfect memory rather than careful record keeping, and on criteria that changes direction in the proverbial breeze.

A new class of software has begun to assist managers in completing the written appraisal - a process often regarded with the same enthusiasm as a visit to the dentist. Managers know a professionally written review is valuable to the company and employee, and can prevent subsequent complications to that relationship. But the pain of actually producing the document often leads to procrastination and a rushed job. The result is often inconsistent at best and unfair - or even illegal - at worst.

It doesn't have to be this way. As Performance Solutions Technology's Review Writer has demonstrated, a manager's personal computer can serve as a co-author and collaborator in producing performance reviews worthy of the name. This white paper gives a brief history of the written appraisal in the U.S., describes some of the pitfalls evaluators fall into, and shows how good evaluation software can be a lifeline to creating a better written report.

**Federal guidelines demand better reporting**

A performance review may seem like a private transaction between manager and employee. In most cases, the document may be filed away in a cabinet or hard disk and never read again. But for the past 30 years, society has sought ways of ensuring that an employee's livelihood is protected against the capricious whim of a careless or even vengeful manager, and is based on clear objectives and careful record keeping. The written appraisal stands alone as the record of how an organization views an employee. As such, it is one of the most important and fundamental documents a manager creates.

Formal performance appraisals in the United States date back to the early 1900s in government and military jobs. In this sector, the tradition of promotions based on merit required an objective measurement of performance - and hence, the written evaluation. This tradition moved to industrial employees after World War I, and into the general work environment after World War II. But while most large organizations were conducting appraisals by the early 1950s, the programs gave only a rough measure of performance - with a few grades issued for such traits as "initiative" or "motivation."

The real turning point in appraisal writing came in the mid- to late-1960s when federal guidelines demanded a more objective and systematic means of evaluating employees - one that could, if necessary, be defended. These federal mandates have gone a long way to making the appraisal process more fair, but in doing so, they put more pressure on the manager to produce a truly professional document.

Most of the guidelines have come from the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC). The rules are straightforward. They stipulate that:

- Employees not be discriminated against because of race, color, sex, age, creed, or national origin;
- that employees performing similar jobs must be paid equally;
- and that people with handicaps have equal opportunity.

In 1978, the EEOC further stipulated that the appraisal accurately reflect job-related performance, that is, it must be based on facts, not impressions.

While expectations have escalated over the quality of a written evaluation, the tools have remained largely the same. Some managers have substituted a word processor for a paper form; but until recently, the software did nothing to assist in this difficult writing assignment.

All this has changed with a new class of software specifically designed to help managers produce professional-quality appraisals. Review Writer, for example, is designed to address the most common problems associated with written appraisals - from the organization of records to writer's block.

**Evaluation pitfalls:**

***Incomplete documentation***

Too often in writing an evaluation, managers try to reconstruct an entire year's performance without any documentation to back it up. But recording, not mere observation, plays a big role in producing a professional-quality appraisal. All good managers informally take note of performance factors during the course of a year. Few of them take the time to establish a record-keeping system in which this information can be deposited for quick and easy retrieval.

Ideally, information should be collected throughout the appraisal period on a regular basis. Such "sub-appraisals" are particularly helpful at the beginning of the assessment period when recollection is bound to be most difficult. Obviously, the data to be gathered depends on the nature of the position being evaluated. For a sales representative, call reports, dollar volumes of sales, number of calls per day, and timeliness of reports can all be of value.

Managers also should record significant incidents, both negative and positive, that occur during the year and relate to performance. Particularly in some job categories, managers should also record observations in the course of the business day.

The personal computer, with its ability to efficiently store documents for fast retrieval, is a natural ally in this process. Review Writer, for example, can import performance data recorded over time from Performance Solutions Technology's ManagePro management application.

***Fuzzy evaluation criteria***

A second major pitfall in writing evaluations is in not establishing a strong performance criteria, and therefore not addressing the issues related to performance. During any review process, it is imperative that managers not only keep in mind an employee's job description, but explicitly state the major goals for the review period.

What is the basis of measurement by which an employee is evaluated? A chemical company, for example, might want its sales force to be persuasive, outgoing, and good with people. An all-star researcher in the R&D department, on the other hand, may be an introverted curmudgeon while still being a prized corporate asset. By defining the measurement basis up-front, managers can better address the issues that count.

In addition, managers should keep in mind that performance objectives must be specific. It is not enough to say that the goal is to design a new product or increase sales or improve customer service. A goal should be expressed in clearly worded and measurable terms: naming which products are to be developed, how much sales are to be increased, and by what percent customers believe they are satisfied with service. Not every goal can be quantified, of course, but the opportunity to do so should not be overlooked.

Well-designed appraisal software will prompt users to think about this criteria up-front. Review Writer offers a Goal Rater dialog box providing room for an evaluation message and examples. The structure encourages managers to be specific about the goals - stating specific criteria to be fulfilled during the year.

***The importance of weighted grades***

A third area written appraisals go off track are in the "grades" for goals and objectives such as increase sales by 10% and performance factors such as teamwork, planning ahead, professionalism, and leadership. Is punctuality as important as teamwork? Is analytical problem solving as important as maintaining key relationships?

On most pre-printed corporate forms, managers have no opportunity to weigh those categories that are most important to the job. A good written appraisal may assign a 60 percent weight to goals and objectives, 40 percent to performance factors.

Evaluation packages can not only provide a weighting system, but automatically calculate the results. Review Writer allows users to associate a percentage weighting with each item on a list, then automatically adjusts the values to total 100 percent.

#### **Careful wording**

A manager is not expected to be an attorney, of course, and in most cases good common sense will go a long way. But written evaluations should be free of inflammatory and problematic language. Evaluations should be tangible, free of subjective, unsubstantiated impressions. For this reason, an evaluation should be edited as much for misleading statements as for good spelling.

Computer applications, which can already scan text for spelling and grammatical errors, can be of great help here. Review Writer's Legal Check facility, for example, checks text for potentially inappropriate and sensitive words and phrases, allowing the manager to replace the wording. The content was developed by attorneys from the San Francisco headquarters of Orrick, Herrington & Sutcliffe, a leading firm in the area of discrimination and wrongful termination. For example, if a manager refers to an employee's maternity leave, whether positively or negatively, Review Writer will flag this remark as inappropriate because it may not be relevant to job performance and may evidence unlawful bias.

#### **Accelerating the writing process**

One other factor inhibiting good evaluations is worth noting: writer's block. Good writing is difficult, and the fear of a blank screen or paper form is well founded.

A good review package can help accelerate the process by providing samples of text that managers can copy and modify. Review Writer provides ratings of more than 70 performance factors, with each paragraph crafted with the overall rating in mind, and each sentence taking into account the ratings on other factors in the same area. Suggestions for improving one's performance are also included. More than 14,000 model paragraphs are provided. It is not expected that managers will use all the text verbatim, but it provides a strong, well-organized foundation from which they can build upon in writing a high quality, effective review.

#### **Good advice, higher productivity**

A good evaluation package should also look beyond the writing process itself, to provide what one software reviewer calls a "human-resources-counselor-in-a-box." Review Writer advises users on such common problems as structuring the discussion and coping with defensiveness. The material comes from Dr. William S. Swan, the reigning authority on performance appraisals.

If the bottom line benefit of software-aided performance review writing is a more professionally written document, a side benefit is increased productivity. The numerous managers and HR personnel we've spoken with say that a typical review takes three to four hours, and even longer if the review is not positive. With Review Writer, users say that it takes about an hour to complete a thoughtful and thorough evaluation.

A White Paper by Norman Wu, President and CEO  
1994, Avantos Performance Systems, Inc.