

# LEGAL MANAGEMENT

THE MAGAZINE OF THE ASSOCIATION OF LEGAL ADMINISTRATORS

## Analysis to Action: Turning a Performance Gap into Core Competence

You just completed an employee skills assessment and collected loads of data about individual capabilities, strengths and areas in need of improvement. Now what?



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While a gap analysis is a crucial part of any evaluation, it is only valuable if it can be used to advance talent development initiatives. How do you turn this wealth of information into actions that will further enhance employee performance and build critical skills that add value to your organization?

Your challenge is to create an effective evaluation and action program that is aligned to the firm's current strategic objectives, yet flexible enough to accommodate today's ever-changing priorities. Great programs include a combination of tools, technologies and evaluation strategies, such as knowledge checks, graded exercises and application simulations. They also provide a method or process for aligning individual employee results to personalized learning plans.

The best programs look beyond technical skills to cultivate higher value competencies like communication, critical thinking, creativity and collaboration. These deliver the greatest impact to productivity and client service.

### ASK THE RIGHT QUESTIONS

In his classic tale *Alice in Wonderland*, Lewis Carroll wrote: "If you don't know where you are going, any road will take you there." Likewise, a solid assessment strategy requires that you start with the end in mind. You must articulate desired outcomes that are specific, measurable and *meaningful*.

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Start by asking and answering this question: Why are we doing this assessment? You have to dig deep into the *why* in order to connect the program to your firm's business goals, priorities and employee performance objectives. Articulating the *why will* also help you identify what skills and competencies your employees must possess.

The end goal has to be more than "We need secretaries to increase their Excel skills." This isn't an

end, but rather a means to an end. It doesn't address which specific skills are desired by whom or how to measure the improvement. A better end goal is "We need M&A [mergers and acquisitions] secretaries to increase their Excel pivot table skills from level 1 to level 3."

To complete the end goal, align it to a strategic objective and restate it: "We need M&A secretaries to increase their Excel pivot table skills from level 1 to level 3 so they are capable of shifting data analysis and report generation away from lawyers, freeing fee-earners for more billable activities."

Clearly thinking through the true end goal makes it easier to move from questions to actions.

### **CREATE AN ACTIONABLE PROGRAM**

Establishing a link between assessment data and prescribed learning is critical to closing any skill gap. You can dramatically reduce the time an employee needs to achieve competence by complementing the assessment program with personalized learning plans. Avoid generic content in favor of legal-specific materials. Don't be afraid to think outside of the traditional classroom.

To accommodate different schedules and learning preferences, offer a variety of media, including self-directed learning, virtual instruction and in-person training, as well as ongoing mentoring and coaching activities. Because people want and need to learn at different times, make courseware available any time and from any place.

For busy lawyers and staff, offer micro-learning that can be completed in a few minutes then combined with other related learning. This is a great way to build skills without pulling people away from their desks to attend training.

### **CHANGE THE CONVERSATION**

Once you develop accurate skill profiles and detailed learning plans for each employee, you can leverage that information during performance discussions. Elevate conversations into discussions about the firm's investment in the employees' growth, professional development and increasing value to the firm.

Use your understanding of how employees align to required skills and core competencies as a tool for talent progression, and as an indicator of assignment should they transition from one practice area to another. Likewise, a structured learning plan can facilitate the development of critical skills for new hires.

The practice of law is rapidly changing, and so are the required skills and competencies for various roles. Take the initiative to move performance evaluations from annual to quarterly conversations, or even more often as business needs dictate. This more frequent and "real-time" feedback will benefit your employees.

Creating an effective skills evaluation aligned to the firm's strategic objectives is but the first step in your talent development program.

Simply knowing where your employees need improvement is of limited value to you and to the firm. Turn that knowledge into action by applying personalized learning plans to close individual skills gaps. Think outside the classroom to deliver a variety of micro-learning topics that build skills and develop high value competencies. Then leverage this wealth of information to improve performance and better manage your firm's most important asset — its people.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

**Cindy Mitchell** is the Product Development Manager at Traveling Coaches, an ALA business partner. She has more than 20 years of experience in the design and development of learning programs that deliver holistic and personalized learning experiences.

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