

Managing probation

Introduction

All staff who are new to the University must have a probationary period. Occasionally, staff who change their role to a substantially different one may also be on probation. Probation lets us see if the new employee can fulfil the requirements of the job and lets the employee check that the job is really what they wanted. The outcome of a probationary period is a decision from you whether to confirm the

person in post, extend the probationary period, or recommend dismissal.

Most importantly, probation is a chance to get the employee up to speed through clear objectives, feedback, guidance and support. If well planned, confirmation in post is usually the result. But it can occasionally go wrong, either because the manager does not fulfil their role, or the employee does not fulfil theirs.

What to do

1. Browse the HR website on Probation

If you are new to management, the HR pages are an essential start point too. Browse them to become familiar with the content and to see what documents, flowcharts and sample letters etc are available.

If you have managed before, you will probably have a good grasp of induction and probation, but best to check. Have a look at the HR webpages on Probation. One thing to notice immediately is that processes can change according to the category of staff (support, academic-related, academic).

We have captured some of the essential points here as a quick refresher, so that you can quickly call this up to remind you of the main points. And you can look at the other Guides that are relevant to this topic, such as Giving feedback.

2. Induct the person properly

Induction is the final stage in effective recruitment. The new employee should know exactly what is expected of them in terms of their tasks, the standards required, any deadlines and the priorities. They should also have their probation explained to them. The length of their probation will be set out in their job offer letter.

This is also the time to discuss any specific support or training they might need. If they have a disability or health challenge, do they need a reasonable adjustment to be made? Do they need training on any tasks or equipment?

If you have taken over a team where someone is on probation, there should be a record of this discussion on their file.

If you recruit someone new to your team, make sure you follow the guidance on induction and probation and keep appropriate records.

3. Review progress regularly

There are two formal review points during probation – mid way and then about a month before the end of the probationary period. But you should meet much more regularly with the probationer to see how things are going, give feedback and agree priorities and objectives.

Ask yourself, are they meeting the required standards? If not, what else do they need to do? Are they achieving objectives? This is the key period during which you shape performance, enable the individual to start achieving and provide constructive feedback to ensure the success of probation.

If things are not going well, it is your job to explain what is not going well, explore why and what can be done and agree a way forward. You must agree a plan of action for improvement. Keep notes (you are required to keep notes at the formal review points, but we recommend that you do so throughout).

If you feel things are not improving and you are not sure what to try next, talk to your line manager, administrator or HR support.

In general, these regular meetings are a chance to exchange news, discuss work and plan ahead. They are usually business-like but relaxed meetings that help to shape performance, check what support might be needed, listen to each other and get to know each other. But, occasionally, you may have to be more directive and point out where things are not going as they should. You want this person to succeed, so you cannot accept performance that is not up to scratch. That is not fair on them or the University.

If you have to agree an improvement plan, templates and examples are available. Always follow-up on any agreed plans so that you can continue to shape and support performance and provide every chance of success.

4. Carry out the formal reviews, and make your recommendation

You are required to carry out at least two formal reviews and document them. The mid-point review will summarise what has happened since the start of probation and plan ahead. The review near the end of probation will summarise the probationary period overall and enable you to come to a recommendation as to whether the person is confirmed in post, has their probation extended so that you can gather more evidence of their capability to meet the requirements, or are dismissed. Don't leave this until just a week or a few days before the end of their probation. Do it about a month before the end.

Note that **your role is to recommend the action to be taken**. Your department will decide what this is. If dismissal is thought to be appropriate, the HR Business Partner must be consulted first. They will expect to see your written records and action plans, and your record of behaviours and outputs that indicate the person is not meeting the requirements.

An extension or dismissal will not be considered if you have not followed the correct process for managing poor or unacceptable performance. Always act promptly if things are not going right during probation and consult the guidance on the HR support webpages. Talk to your line manager and seek immediate advice from local HR.

Further resources

Links

[HR main webpage](#) on probation

A [flowchart overview](#) of the process

[Step by step](#) guide, plus access on the right-hand side to forms and letters and handbooks that cover the difference between categories of staff.

[HR Policy on probation](#), which sets out the purpose and how to link probationary reviews to subsequent PDR

A useful [list of HR contacts](#), including a list of the HR Business Partners for each area

Related guides from this series

- Giving feedback
- One to ones
- Having difficult conversations
- PDR

About this guide

This guide has been developed for staff who have recently taken on the responsibility of managing other staff members. Guides were produced to cover key topics to induct, guide and support managers through key areas of responsibility. These guides are intended to be 'living documents' and will be re-released over time. Please get in touch with feedback and suggestions: pod@admin.ox.ac.uk

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