

About poor work performance

Capability refers to an employee's skills, ability, aptitude and knowledge in relation to the job that he is employed to do. Lack of capability is not the employee's fault and few employees choose to carry out their work badly, make mistakes, fail to complete tasks, or have poor relationships with colleagues or customers.

Learning from life's lessons

A client came to me and said that Gerry, an employee who had been with his company for some time, was unable to properly carry out his duties and was causing serious productivity problems. The employer wanted to know if he could sack Gerry, expressed his considerable frustration and said "He's always been like this; slow to learn and loses the skills he does manage to gain quickly." He paused long enough in the diatribe to allow me to ask how long Gerry had been working there. I expected the employer to say something like, "About six months." I was amazed when the reply was "15 years . and he's always been useless" .

The example above is an extreme case, but the circumstances are common; we call it the ostrich manoeuvre in our office. Doing nothing will get you nowhere and as well as annoying you, it usually demotivates other, more competent employees.

Do note that there is a distinction to be made between incapability and misconduct. In simple terms you can define incapability as "can't meet your standards" and misconduct as "won't meet your standards".

A lack of capability exists where the employee is unable to carry out the job to the standard required by the employer, even if he is genuinely trying to do so. It is the company's standard that is relevant, and not the manager's personal opinion of the employee.

If an employee fails to come up to the required standard as a result of his carelessness, negligence or idleness, this will not constitute lack of capability, but misconduct.

Often a lack of capability will be outside the employee's direct control. For example, it would be unrealistic to blame an employee for poor work performance where the root cause of the problem is that adequate training has not been provided; that would be a capability matter. Generally, an employee will have control over his conduct at work. If an employee fails to make the necessary effort to do his job, that's a conduct matter.

It can sometimes be difficult to determine whether an employee's poor performance is due to inherent incapability or whether it is laziness, negligence or a lack of effort. In some cases, there may be an element of all of these factors. In the first instance, give the employee the benefit of the doubt and performance manage the employee informally.

Where you have a poor work performance issue, try to identify the cause of the problem. Busy managers might be tempted to assume that performance problems arise because of an employee's carelessness or lack of effort; some employees will be guilty of this, but don't assume it. There are a number of possible causes of poor performance. The cause of the poor work performance should emerge when you carry out an investigation.

Learning from life's lessons

An employer found a series of mistakes in work produced by a woman who assembled small electronic components. It was close work and required meticulous attention to detail. We tested her knowledge (it was fine) and she was very diligent and careful.

We were mystified until during the investigation we asked a question which made us realise that she needed spectacles for close work. Once she'd been provided with these, the mistakes stopped.

The first step is to investigate the cause of the unsatisfactory performance with the employee, the solution to the problem should then become apparent. If you can remove or reduce the cause of the problem, the employee's performance is likely to improve.

Let's start by finding out about the legal rights and responsibilities of employers.