



Employer appraisal – a route to revalidation?

In future all health professionals will have to revalidate their registration every few years. **David Moore** reports on research to help the GOC decide how to revalidate optical practitioners

Performance reviews are common practice in all work sectors but little is known about how professionals in the optical sector are appraised by their employers. The General Optical Council (GOC) recently published research to explore whether employer appraisal should form part of the proposed revalidation process for optometrists and dispensing opticians from 2013. The project was commissioned with Department of Health funds to help the GOC decide how registrants should revalidate.

The project looked at whether optical staff are appraised by their employers and examined the content of appraisals to assess whether they could provide the evidence of continuing competence and fitness to practise required for revalidation. The research also considered whether employer appraisal schemes could be accredited by the GOC and explored possible alternatives for registrants who are not appraised.

The report begins by clarifying the concept of appraisal before considering evidence collected from employers and practitioners. Interview, survey and focus group methods were used to gather data and employer appraisal policies and documentation were reviewed. Informants were drawn from across the UK and from the main business areas in which registrants are employed.

In the commercial sector, where most registrants work, employers are free to decide whether or not to appraise their staff and to determine the content and frequency of appraisals. Appraisal is regarded by many as a matter of good employment practice that can also have commercial benefits. Increasingly it is also recognised as an important element of clinical governance.

The research revealed a variety of approaches to appraisal, reflecting the diversity in size and structure of optical businesses. However, the majority of schemes operate on an annual cycle, some with interim reviews. The highest

level of scrutiny encountered involved monthly reviews, direct observation of practice and audits of case records, but this was by no means typical.

Most large optical employers follow a similar appraisal process, use pro-forma documentation and record personal action plans. However, the criteria against which performance is judged vary, although most have a commercial rather than clinical focus. Appraisals are often supplemented by an audit of records and a review of complaints. In many cases appraisals are conducted by non-optically qualified line managers.

A distinction was evident among the large multiples. Those with a centralised management function and strong corporate ethos tended to have well established appraisal policies and practices which were performance managed, and as a consequence tended to achieve high completion rates. In contrast, while those with a more distributed management structure (such as venture partnerships) also had corporate appraisal policies, there was nevertheless much greater variability in appraisal practice because local managers tended to have much greater discretion in how they operated.

Some employers indicated that, in the past, they had appraised their regular locums but they no longer did so because it raised questions about the locum's self-employed status. Some were concerned that mechanisms should be found to ensure that locum staff cannot escape performance review, and some observed that registrants should be required to work a minimum number of hours in each revalidation period.

Formal appraisal is much more of a rarity in smaller independents. Owners considered it more appropriate to provide informal feedback on job performance as and when required.

NHS staff have nationally agreed terms and conditions of service which include an annual development review based on the NHS Knowledge and Skills Framework (KSF). Full implementation has yet to be achieved

and some questioned whether the KSF fully captures optical competence.

The majority of registrants employed in universities and colleges are appraised but academic responsibilities are the main focus of their appraisals.

As valuable as appraisal schemes are to employers they do have limitations as regards revalidation. Most do not cover the range of criteria that interest the GOC; there is a lack of consistency in the application of standards by appraisers, many of whom are not trained for the role; many appraisals are undertaken by non-optically qualified managers (calling into question their ability to judge professional competence); there is a tendency to norm-referencing (as many schemes are pay-related); and quality assurance is underdeveloped. These limitations militate against the accreditation of appraisal schemes and the use of appraisal as a mandatory source of evidence for revalidation.

With notable exceptions, most employers were reluctant to amend their schemes to accommodate additional requirements for revalidation because of the cost and time associated with a more rigorous, professionally focused review, and also because of the intrusion of professional regulation into the employer-employee relationship.

Informants suggested alternatives to appraisal, expressing a strong preference for a continuing education and training-based system but acknowledging that it would need to be strengthened, not least to make it more challenging and to promote interaction with professional peers.

It is clear appraisal can be a useful tool for employers and practitioners but that it does not currently address the breadth of professional competence required – nor is it applied sufficiently uniformly – to count towards revalidation for all registrants. ●

● The full report is available at: www.optical.org/goc/filemanager/root/site_assets/revalidation/revalidation_-_employer_appraisal_report.pdf

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