

New Business Thinking:

Mind Mapping your way to more creativity and less box-ticking

Staff appraisals can be transformed into opportunities for structured development, Clare Gascoigne discovers

Annual staff appraisals are a key element in personnel management. But all too often an appraisal can become a box-ticking exercise that is of little help to either staff or management. "A lot of appraisals are driven by form-filling," says Clive Lewis, managing director of Illumine, a training company based in Windsor. "But that may not give you the information you need to know."

This was the problem faced by Pantek, a software and hardware distributor based in Stockport, Cheshire, that provides industrial automation systems to blue-chip companies such as Boots, UK Coal and Network Rail.

"We found that the fixed form of appraisals was too rigid and we were getting inconsistencies," says John Bailey, managing director of Pantek, a 20-year-old company with 61 employees. Bailey found that a new approach to the process freed them from form-based constraints. The company put its appraisal sequence on to a business map, using Mindjet's MindManager software. This allows appraisals to jump around between different topics while ensuring that all topics are covered. The map is open on a laptop during the session, and is filled in collaboratively as the appraisal proceeds.

Using a map has advantages beyond ease of use. "It's open and instant," says Bailey. "This means there's agreement at the time and no possibility of misinterpretation afterwards."

It speeds things up, too. "Before, I would ask managers whether they had completed their appraisals and find they had done the interviews but had yet to write them up."

Then there would be a further delay when the report went back to the member of staff to correct inaccuracies. By the time it was finished, the employee had lost motivation. Now, each individual member of staff can walk away with a clear set of objectives that they can start to set in motion as soon as the process ends.

"Appraisals are best done when both sides give some thought to the subject in advance," says Lewis. "But often that is not possible and a manager will say, 'Come to my office in 10 minutes and we'll do your appraisal'."

In such a situation, he says, the collaborative nature of a business map can be of real help, because it allows both manager and employee to record points in an unstructured way yet end up with a structured account.

"Creativity flourishes in an informal flexible situation where people are given autonomy, but a lot of job descriptions are about putting constraints around people," says Professor Babis Mainemelis of the London Business School.

"People get stuck in old ways of thinking. You need to play with ideas, ask questions, see things from different points of view to generate different responses — some may be ludicrous but some will be good."

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That freedom can be particularly valuable in the human resources department, says Lewis. HR often struggles to clarify the value it can add to an organisation.

“When you are creating a job description,” he says, “the emphasis if you are using a business map is on the thinking, and that can then be converted into a Microsoft Word document.

“Or it can be used as a tool for succession planning — you can map a company’s strengths and weakness, and then start populating the gaps.”