Google, Meta Struggle to Figure Out Employee Reviews



Illustration by Matheus Costa.



By Mark Matousek

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Apr 12, 2023, 6:00am PDT

Comments by Mike Alwill, Colleen McCreary, and 1 other

Last year, Google cut the number of employee performance reviews it conducts annually from two to one, responding to complaints that twice-a-year reviews consumed too much time. In the new system, managers were asked to talk more casually—but more frequently, once a quarter—with their subordinates about their performance. And Google wanted managers to record the results of the conversations.

But the new system hasn't worked as intended, according to one current and two former employees. Some managers delivered their quarterly

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performance summaries late or wrote only brief, one-sentence recaps of the conversations. In at least one case, a manager labeled the calendar invites for some of their meetings as performance discussions but instead used the meetings to merely assign or receive updates on tasks.

The Takeaway

- Since the 2010s, companies have moved towards more frequent employee feedback
- Some firms, including Google and Intuit, have struggled to get managers on board
- Meta has changed its performance review schedule twice in the past two years

A Google spokesperson declined to comment on its process. But it's not the only big tech company that has struggled to come up with a better system for giving performance reviews. Last year, for instance, Facebook owner Meta Platforms decided to cut the number of formal evaluations employees received each year from two to one, partly due to the amount of work each review took.

A few weeks ago, Meta reversed its decision, citing feedback it had received from employees who said they wanted more communication about how they were doing, according to a current Meta manager. The reversal prompted a lot of discussion internally, with some employees questioning whether Meta had given the new system enough of a chance, the person said. (The Wall Street Journal earlier reported on the reversal).

The importance of performance management has come to the fore in recent months in tech as nearly every major tech company has announced mass layoffs, with more coming. At several companies, including Meta and Shopify, performance reviews appear to have played a role in identifying people to lay off, The Information has previously reported. Meta, for instance, told managers to increase the proportion of employees who got low ratings.

Google has also pushed its managers to toughen how they evaluate employees. Last fall, at least one Google executive told managers they were not flagging enough of their subordinates as underperformers, according to the current employee and one of the former employees.

A Google spokesperson noted that some of its laid-off employees were high performers.

Business Staple

The annual performance review has been a staple of American business culture since the middle of the 20th century. The reason is simple, according to HR consultants.

"When employees do get meaningful feedback, they're much more likely to be engaged, which means they're much more likely to be productive," said Edie Goldberg, founder of human resources consulting firm E.L. Goldberg & Associates.

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During the 2010s, some companies began placing less emphasis on annual reviews and started encouraging managers to have more frequent but less exhaustive performance discussions with their reports, usually at least once per quarter.

According to a Harvard Business Review article, Adobe helped spark the trend in 2012, deciding its annual performance reviews had become too time-consuming and too slow to deliver feedback. Employees were often surprised when managers offered criticism they had withheld over the prior 12 months, Donna Morris, Adobe's former senior vice president of customer and employee experience, wrote in a 2016 article for the WorldatWork Journal. Instead of holding annual reviews, Adobe encouraged managers to give their reports feedback at least once per quarter.

The trend toward more-regular check-ins accelerated during the pandemic, HR consultants said, as companies sought to adapt to a business environment that required faster adjustments while keeping employees engaged as they got used to remote work. By 2022, 59% of companies had performance review systems that included check-ins at least once per quarter, up from 42% in 2016, according to WorldatWork, an HR-focused nonprofit.

That doesn't mean managers required to give quarterly check-ins actually follow through. Getting managers in the habit of providing consistent feedback is difficult, HR consultants say. Some managers fear how employees will react to criticism or feel too overwhelmed by their own responsibilities to spend additional time preparing meaningful guidance on a regular basis.

"There's always a bit of difficulty," for many companies when they start asking managers to provide more-frequent feedback to employees, said Christy Pruitt-Haynes, head of talent and performance at the NeuroLeadership Institute, a workplace research and consulting firm. "Giving feedback is scary."

For more than five years, for instance, Intuit has been encouraging managers to check in with their team members once a month to discuss their performance. Starting around 2019, Intuit went a step further and asked managers and their subordinates to record the results of the check-ins in Betterworks, a software program designed for performance reviews, made by a startup with the same name.

The results were worse than the company hoped, according to two people familiar with the matter. In recent years, less than half of employees have completed reports on their monthly discussions, one of the people said, compared to around 90% for annual reviews. The person noted that the rate at which managers and employees have monthly conversations about performance is likely higher than the Betterworks data suggests.

Within the past year, Intuit has sought to better understand how managers are conducting monthly check-ins by asking employees in

managers are conducting monthly check-ins by asking employees in biannual surveys if they have discussed their career goals with their manager, one of the people said. Previously, the company had given executives access to data on how often people within their teams filed reports on their monthly performance discussions.

Intuit didn't respond to a request for comment.

Grueling Process

At Meta, last year's shift away from twice-yearly reviews was largely a reaction to how time-consuming the review process had become. In the twice-yearly system, managers previously had to rate employees on seven possible grades for both the annual and midyear evaluations, ranging from "meets some expectations" at the bottom to "redefines expectations" at the top. It involved a phase where managers held meetings with their peers to defend how they'd rated people on their teams, a grueling process known internally as calibration. Both the annual and midyear reviews contributed to employees' bonus calculations.

The twice-yearly system also fueled a tendency among employees to focus on short-term goals and projects because they wanted to show evidence of successes every six months, current and former employees said.

Meta decided to reinstitute the midyear review by making it less onerous than the final review. Under the new system, managers will choose from three possible ratings for the midyear review and will discuss fewer employees during the calibration process, according to a current Meta employee. The midyear review will not affect employees' compensation.

The change reflects the challenges of getting managers to provide consistent feedback without the structure of a formal performance review. But when companies are able to convince managers to coach their reports throughout the year, employees notice the difference. Vahid Mansoori, a former product manager at Adobe from 2019 until earlier this year, said he felt he received better feedback at Adobe than at any other company he's worked for.

"I think the frequency was right," he said.

Jon Victor and Sylvia Varnham O'Regan contributed to this article.

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There's a true tension when it comes to performance reviews and it's that a discrete, quantitative rating has tangible impact on an employee's job security and pay despite the fact that the work the majority of employees do is extremely nuanced and multifaceted. And since employees want to keep their jobs and get paid in full, these systems incentivize employees to either disregard the soft skill work or push it on someone else, leading to a slow rot across the company that leadership often answers with... you guessed it, even more metrics-oriented performance reviews.

At the same time, these same companies are heavy on the "the company is family" and "you should bring personal passion to your work" rhetoric, wanting to have their cake and eat it too as they cog-ify workers and insinuate they want levels of investment typically associated with promising, early stage companies (without the potential for equity growth or advancement).

One big missing piece of the puzzle is hiring good managers--that is, not just people who have advanced their way to the management track and who can abide by a company's bureaucracy, but actual skilled people managers who inspire the people on their team and take a genuine interest in their growth. But, ironically, such managerial skills fall into the soft skill bucket and are hard to sell on a manger's own performance review, especially compared to peer managers who are content to let their teams fend for themselves while they spend their cycles appeasing upstream leadership and execs to look good.

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Mike Alwill This is so eloquently and clearly written. You have described the situation very concisely for so many organizations!

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Colleen McCreary

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In general, performance reviews are a poorly executed practice. Even when you chase around managers to fill them out, it's generally not constructive. Rarely could I ever fire someone based on what was written. Top performers are usually annoyed.

This is just poor program management. You can't ask mgrs to do more documented work, without taking other work away or a structured process.

In my experiences, I've gotten rid of performance reviews at every company I've worked at since 2009. There are great tools out there (Lattice/15Five are the most robust) and at my last company, we managed to get 70%+ managers to do weekly feedback (and quarterly checkins) but we had a tool (15Five) that both mgrs & employees used weekly, our quarterly checkins were done in the same tool with a

couple of different questions, and that was that. We also had 90% of employees opting into peer/upward feedback- mainly by not tying it to reviews or ratings but in the spirit of being actually helpful.

Way easier for mgrs to give small ongoing micro feedback/corrections and documented than some big bang.

I also find ratings to be a distraction and unhelpful. There's a difference between growth & pay for intrinsically motivated people. You can set up processes that separate pay/promotions from coaching/growth - a lot of it requires extensive work on career frameworks and expectations, manager/leader behavior from the top encouraging and rewarding good people mgmt, and clarity on how these processes work together, how they happen, and who decides.

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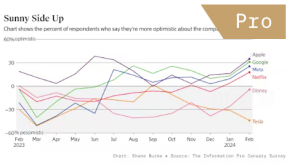
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