

Conducting Classification Audits

Background

When documentation submitted by the supervisor or position incumbent does not provide sufficient information for making a reclassification or reallocation decision, it may be necessary to conduct an audit of the position by interviewing the employee. Typically, the audit involves interviewing the incumbent of the position that has been submitted for class review and the supervisor of the incumbent. It's best to meet with the incumbent first in a separate meeting, so s/he has an opportunity to answer questions regarding her/his position without feeling inhibited by the supervisor's presence. A meeting with the supervisor should be scheduled immediately after the meeting with the incumbent in order to gather additional clarification about the duties assigned to the incumbent, verify information provided by the incumbent, examine how the incumbent's position compares to other positions within the work unit, and so on. Some Human Resources staff prefer to schedule a meeting with the supervisor on a different day, in order to have time to review the audit notes from the meeting with the incumbent and prepare additional questions.

Phone Audits

It is also possible to conduct audits of employees and supervisors via phone. Phone audits can be more economical by not requiring the Human Resources staff to travel great distances. Most of the audit and interviewing-related tips provided in this document can be applied to either phone or in-person audits.

Scheduling the Audit

Contact the employee's human resources office and supervisor to notify the supervisor that an audit will be scheduled with the employee. Make appointments to speak with the incumbent and supervisor, preferably at their own work locations. Explain the purpose of the audit as an opportunity for human resources to learn more about the duties assigned to the incumbent and the changes that have occurred to the position.

It's important to establish a comfortable working rapport. A person who has conducted a thorough review of the submitted materials prior to the audit should come across as prepared and competent to handle the class review request fairly. This promotes a positive professional atmosphere. Both the incumbent and the supervisor may feel apprehensive or uncomfortable during an audit. Remember this throughout the audit process and react accordingly in an effort to minimize any negative effects. For example, some comments and responses from incumbents and supervisors may be prompted by feeling that they are being threatened or that their worth is being challenged. It's important to emphasize that the purpose of the audit is to learn more about the duties assigned to the position, not to evaluate the quality of the incumbent's work performance. (An exception to this is when the supervisor has identified the incumbent as experiencing performance problems, in which case the person conducting the audit **will** need to review performance evaluations and other documentation of performance problems developed by the supervisor. Regrade of an incumbent is not possible unless s/he has performed satisfactorily the higher level duties for a minimum of six months.)

Sometimes employees may ask to have a union representative or another observer sit in on the audit. It is the opinion of the OSER Legal Counsel that it is the auditor's decision whether to allow the representative to observe the audit. Most auditors do not allow union representatives to observe because classification is not a bargainable or grievable issue. If the auditor does allow a representative to attend the audit, the auditor should set the ground rules at the beginning of the audit and explain that the representative is there to observe and may not participate in the audit by answering questions on behalf of the employee.

Generally, meeting with employees on a one-to-one basis is more effective than group meetings, even if the auditor has reclassification requests for several employees performing the same work in the same organizational unit. In a group audit, the employees have to compete with each other for the auditor's attention. The auditor will gather more thorough information if s/he meets with employees one-to-one.

When scheduling the audit with the employee, ask her/him to reserve a meeting room or conference room for the meeting. It's best to meet with the employee in a quiet, private conference room, rather than in a work cubicle. This will prevent phone calls, visitors or other distractions and interruptions. The audit may require a tour of the employee's work facility or work station, or going out in the field with the employee to observe the equipment, manuals, and procedures used by the employee. In general, audits take one to two hours, depending on how technical and complex the position/situation is.

Recommend that the employee review her/his current position description (PD) which was submitted with the class review request in order to prepare for the audit, since most of the questions will be based on the statements on the employee's PD. Provide the employee with the date of the old and new PDs submitted with the request to ensure both parties are working from the same documents. Ask the employee to think about changes that have occurred to the position since it was last reviewed for classification purposes and explain that the discussion will focus on changes that may have occurred between the date on the old PD and the new PD. Ask the employee to assemble examples of his/her work that the auditor can take for the working file. Examples might include spreadsheets, databases, forms, reports, policies, procedures, manuals, plans, computer screen printouts, or other documents that the employee is responsible for developing or processing.

The verification audit with the supervisor is essentially the same as the audit with the employee. The questions the auditor asks the supervisor are intended to confirm or refute the information that the employee provided during the audit. The auditor may need clarification regarding who is responsible for certain duties or the differences between the supervisor's and the employee's responsibility for specific program areas. The supervisor should provide the auditor with a "big picture" understanding of how the employee's position is similar to or different from other positions in the work unit, and the potential growth of the position in the future. The supervisory interview should also verify whether or not the employee's level of job performance was satisfactory.

Preparation for the Audit, including Developing a List of Questions

Preparing for the audit includes completing the steps identified in the *Wisconsin Human Resources Handbook* Chapter 370.050. Completing these steps will enable the auditor to identify all the areas in which the auditor will want to ask questions including the duties assigned to the position, the changes which have occurred to the position, and regrade/competition-related questions.

Before developing the list of audit questions, decide what you need to know in order to make a classification decision. The "need to know" list will be based primarily on information obtained from the classification specification; i.e., what are the key differences between the levels within a classification series. Develop questions to ascertain whether or not the position meets these criteria. Develop questions regarding all the major goals and worker activities of the position. It's not necessary to understand the job well enough to perform the duties, but the auditor needs to know enough about the position in order to make the appropriate classification decision. Ask sufficient questions to allow the employee the opportunity to fully explain what s/he does. It's important that the employee feels that s/he received an adequate opportunity to express her/his opinion regarding what is important about the job.

The auditor needs to decide not only what to ask, but how to ask it. Do not assume that the employee understands the reclassification process or the technical terms used by human resources. It is therefore necessary that the you ask questions to get the substance of what the employee does.

For example, if you need to determine whether the person is a "lead worker," instead of asking:

"Are you a lead worker?"

Ask the question:

“Do you train, assign and review the work of other people in your work unit? If so, please describe what you do and give me a couple illustrations.”

The first question assumes that the employee knows and understands the civil service definition of “lead worker.” The second question gets at what a lead worker does. A series of questions like these are more likely to solicit the information needed to make a decision.

Include some general purpose, open-ended questions to ensure the audit covers the complete job. Open-ended questions cannot be answered with a “yes” or “no.” Such questions increase discussion, provide more information, and invite freer responses. Examples of open-ended questions include:

“What other work do you do that we haven’t talked about?”

“What parts of your job that we have talked about do you feel need to be explained in more detail so that I am able to have a better understanding of what you do?”

“What additional information about your job do you want to tell me or feel I should know about so I can understand your job better?”

Probing questions are used to get more in-depth answers and require the interviewer’s careful listening and patience to hear the answer. Examples of probing questions include:

“I’m unclear about what specifically you did on the project. Can you give me specific examples?”

“I know that you review the work of others in your work unit. What kind of work do you review? How does your work differ from the others in your work unit?”

“What do you feel is the most difficult part of your work?”

Examples of Good Standard Audit Questions

“Is your current PD accurate, both in terms of duties and time percentages? If not, what do you believe needs to be changed and why?”

“Please go through the goals and worker activities on your PD and explain what you do.”

“What changes have occurred to your position since it was last reviewed for classification purposes (cite the date of the old PD submitted with the class review request)? What brought about these changes (e.g., reorganization, changes in equipment, changes in the program, etc.)?”

“How is work assigned to your position?”

“Who else in the work unit performs the same or similar work? If there are other people in the same work unit performing similar work, on what basis are assignments made to different people? How is the work divided?” (Get the names and classes of those employees for classification comparison purposes later.)

“Can you walk through a typical process or project assigned to you? Tell me about how you receive the work, what you do with it, how you make a final decision and to whom it goes after that. Is it reviewed by other positions in the unit, your supervisor, or an agency central office position?”

“What kinds of instructions or guidelines are provided to you when you receive the assignment?”

“What manuals, handbooks, or other guidelines do you apply as you perform your work?”

“What kinds of direction, guidelines, or supervision do you receive as you perform the work?”

“What types of questions or problems might you refer to your supervisor? Do the two of you together make a decision on the problem, or does your supervisor make the decision? Who is responsible for carrying out the decision?”

“How often are questions or problems encountered that are referred to your supervisor? (Daily, weekly, monthly, annually?)”

“What kinds of questions or problems do you encounter which you solve independently, without help from other staff or your supervisor?”

“What kind of review does your work receive after you complete it? Is the review provided by your supervisor or a central office position within the agency?”

“Who uses the final products that you develop? (Are the users within the work unit, within the agency, other state agencies, local governments, federal government, or the general public?)”

“Does your work involve making recommendations to your supervisor or other higher-level managers?”

“Do you make these recommendations verbally or in writing?”

“Are you responsible for implementing the recommendation?”

“What interaction do you have with other positions in the same work unit? With other positions in the same agency, in other state agencies, positions in local governments, the federal government, or the general public? What is the purpose of those contacts? Are you providing information, gathering information in order to make a decision, coordinating work efforts, reviewing or evaluating information for correctness, defending program decisions or policies, developing policies, or negotiating agreements?”

Conducting the Audit

Introduce yourself and thank the employee for taking the time to meet with you. Explain that this meeting is an opportunity for you to learn more about her/his job.

The first question asked during the audit should be, “Is this PD which is dated (insert date) an accurate and complete description of your assigned duties?” Give the PD submitted for the class review to the employee and give her/him an opportunity to look it over. If the employee says the PD is not accurate or complete, ask her/him to explain what isn’t accurate or complete, or what is missing from the PD. The auditor may need to follow-up with the employee’s supervisor to see if the PD needs to be revised and updated.

Develop a relaxed, yet business-like atmosphere during the audit. Ask the employee questions from the prepared list and ask follow-up questions if you don’t understand the employee’s response or need a more detailed response. It’s very helpful to ask for examples of work identified on the PD.

Keep the audit focused and neutral. Some venting or floating away from the topic may occur. Try to keep the employee on track during the audit. Don’t become involved in rhetorical or argumentative debates with the employee.

End the audit by asking if the employee has any questions. It’s typical for employees to ask, “What happens next with my reclass?” In responding, be careful about being overly optimistic regarding the time necessary to complete the reclassification analysis. Do not express any opinion on whether or not the request will be approved as you still have more work to do and may have to research other information before making your decision. To express an opinion now is premature.

An appropriate response might be “I’ll go back to my office to complete my analysis of the request, which may include looking at comparable positions. When I have completed my analysis, I’ll document the decision in writing and you’ll receive notification in writing of the decision. Based on my workload, I think I may need (two-to-three weeks, or whatever time frame you think is realistic) to complete the analysis. After you’ve received the decision in writing, please feel free to call me if you have any questions.”

Provide the employee with a business card or give the employee your phone number. Tell the employee that if s/he thinks of any additional information that s/he would like to provide, s/he can call or e-mail that information to you.

After you review the audit information and document the classification analysis, you may run into other areas where more clarification is needed. Feel free to call or e-mail the employee with further questions and indicate that these are follow-up questions to the audit.

Auditing an Employee When There May Be Performance Problems

Performance problems normally do not include work rule violations such as excessive absenteeism, sick leave abuse, or chronic tardiness, which are usually addressed through the progressive disciplinary process.

Performance problems pertain to the employee’s unsatisfactory performance of the assigned duties and responsibilities, and may include issues such as the quantity, quality or timeliness of the work produced. Usually performance problems are not an issue for reclassification/reallocation requests because it’s primarily supervisors who initiate the process. However, employees can self-submit requests, and there have been occasions where the supervisor identifies the employee as having performance problems. Under these circumstances, the Agency and OSER Human Resources staff must review the relevant documentation to determine whether the employee has satisfactorily performed higher level duties for a minimum of six months.

Documents that may be reviewed to determine whether the employee’s performance of the assigned duties has been satisfactory include:

- Formal annual performance evaluations.

- Performance Improvement Plans, Concentrated Performance Planning Documents, or similar forms that document if an employee has been placed on a formalized performance improvement program.
- Any correspondence between the supervisor and the employee regarding the employee’s job performance.

- Work logs, records, reports, or any other documentation pertaining to quantifiable or qualitative evaluations of the employee’s performance.

Example: An employee classified as an Auditor self-submits a reclassification request to the Auditor–Journey classification level. The supervisor says the employee produces fewer audits than other Auditor–Journey positions within the work unit and produces audit records documenting that the employee has generated three audits in one year in comparison to 20 audits generated in one year by each of the other Auditor–Journey positions. All of the audits are of similar scope, impact and complexity and they have an expected written standard of performing 15 audits per year.

When there are questions pertaining to satisfactory performance, it’s imperative that the auditor gather information from both the employee and the supervisor. The auditor needs to assess the quality of the documentation pertaining to the employee’s performance of the assigned duties to determine whether or not the employee’s performance was satisfactory. The auditor should consult with the Agency or OSER legal counsel who will defend the classification decision if an appeal is filed with the Wisconsin Employment Relations Commission to determine whether there is sufficient documentation pertaining to the employee’s job performance to approve or deny the request.

If the employee's reclassification request is denied based on unsatisfactory performance and the supervisor cannot produce sufficient documentation regarding the employee's unsatisfactory performance, inform the supervisor that s/he will be called to testify before the Wisconsin Employment Relations Commission if the employee appeals the decision. Discuss the lack of documentation with the Agency or OSER legal counsel who will defend the classification decision before the Wisconsin Employment Relations Commission.