OPM MSAC ACE

Guide for Conducting Virtual HR Reviews

September 2014

OPM MSAC ACE Virtual HR Evaluation Review Guide

INTRODUCTION

Human Resource accountability reviews may be conducted on site, offsite; or a combination of the two (i.e., hybrid). Taking advantage of technological advancements and maximizing limited travel dollars are two of the primary advantages of conducting off-site or hybrid evaluations. More and more HR work is conducted electronically, thus reviewers should be reviewing the work products in a similar "e-work" setting. In addition, when off-site or virtual reviews are appropriate, travel time is converted to productive audit time and adverse weather conditions are no longer a factor.

Hybrid reviews can be used when all records review and most of the interviews are conducted virtually. However, the in-brief and certain focused interviews or group meetings are conducted on-site. For example, the team lead may determine it is important to increase team visibility and that some on-site time is needed. In addition, based on advance information, there may be a need to conduct selected interviews on-site.

The pre-evaluation and post-evaluation phases are basically the same for any type of review (with a few exceptions), whether it is conducted on-site, virtually, or some combination of the two. As a result, the primary focus of this guide will be on the evaluation phase of the review; however, the guide will highlight some important aspects of the pre and post evaluation phase.

PRE-EVALUATION PHASE FOR AN OFF-SITE/VIRTUAL REVIEW

There are some important *logistical factors* listed below, which should be taken into consideration when conducting virtual reviews.

- Differences in time zones must be taken into consideration, especially if the evaluation team is located on the east coast and the installation being reviewed is on the west coast. This is a major factor when determining meeting and interview times.
- A "shared directory" should be established so that all team members have access to the same records, documents, and files needed to conduct the review.
- Evaluation team members need to have access to automated systems (e.g., e-OPF, performance records, automated staffing system, etc.) so that all personnel actions and case files reviewed can be reconstructed (NOTE- access time should include week prior and week after the conducting phase of the review).

- Establish timeframe for agency POC to respond to questions that arise during the review, e.g., 8 hour turnaround.
- The team lead needs to allow extra time if the installation needs to convert paper records.
- Generally, virtual teams will begin reviewing records and cases prior to the active conducting of the review with the installation/agency. Contacts are generally with the POC.
- The review should be scheduled for one full week as if it was being conducted on-site. The team lead should reserve meeting space, and ensure phone lines are available and that the team can make conference calls or has access to video conference equipment. (Note – it is highly recommended that virtual team members should conduct their review in a conference or meeting room away from their regular office space or cubicle. Team members should not be conducting "regular work" while they are "on-site" for a virtual review).
- There should be an evaluation plan, team assignments, and dedicated work hours as if you were on-site.
- Daily team meetings should be schedule during the week and there should be a team agenda especially when team members are dispersed geographically.
- Team members should turn on an out of office email as if they were onsite and not in the office.

Evaluation Phase For An Off-Site/Virtual review

The following section describes activities that occur during the evaluation phase of a virtual review. Scheduled activities include conducting the opening briefing, meeting with the HR staff, conducting records reviews and interviews, team meetings, and conducting the closeout.

Briefing Top Management and HC/HR Officials and Staffs on the Objectives of the Evaluation

As with any type of evaluation, during the opening briefing with top management and HC/HR officials and staffs, the team leader should share the objectives of the evaluation, including how each implementation system links to the strategic management of Human Capital needs and accomplishment of the agency's mission. This should be a continuation of the communication that began with the scheduling letter and has been further developed with the planning phase.

Team leads should be responsive to agency's concerns or reasonable requests for any targeted fact-finding as part of the evaluation. If possible, work with the agency during the pre-evaluation phase to incorporate reasonable agency requests into the evaluation plan.

The team leader should also confirm the schedules and availability of key individuals and interviewees listed in the Evaluation Plan.

Protocol for virtual opening briefing

Generally, the team leader works closely with the HRM official to schedule the opening briefing with the top management official as the first order of business, via conference call, video conferencing equipment, or Adobe Connect, as the parties deem appropriate. At the discretion of the team leader, the team members are included in the opening briefing. In some cases, based on the top official's schedule, the opening briefing may have to be deferred or conducted with another appropriate high-level official, such as an executive officer or a technical director. Other stakeholders may attend at management's invitation, such as senior managers or heads of departments or directorates.

The meeting is intended to be a management briefing, and it may be inappropriate for union representatives to attend the session. However, a top management official at a facility with an active labor-management partnership council may prefer to have the briefing include this group. Defer all decisions on who attends the opening briefing to the top management official since this meeting is convened for management's benefit and information. Once those decisions have been made, tailor the opening briefing to the attendees.

Confirm that the HRM official transmitted any briefing materials to attendees. During the in-brief, pause and periodically ask if there are any questions (note – team leader may wish to specifically call on the POC as a "sound-check" for questions). This is importance since body language is more difficult to read when using VTC or conference calling equipment.

Content

Building on the relationship established during planning, use the opening briefing to:

- Explain the dual purpose of the evaluation: compliance and process improvement.
- Discuss coverage areas (i.e. strategic planning and alignment, performance culture, talent management, accountability).
- Discuss methodology (i.e. group interviews, interviews with program managers, virtual records review, survey monkey, previous reports, etc.).
- Encourage management's participation in the evaluation process.
- Obtain management's views on the agenda issues and how they affect the organization's mission.
- Emphasize interest in identifying and highlighting best practices.
- Discuss preliminary analysis of data and questionnaire responses, if any.

- Offer to discuss the progress of the evaluation and answer any questions as the work is proceeding.
- Explore possible closeout arrangements, and advise management of any activity that will follow the virtual review, e.g., a written report with findings and solutions.
- Inform management that we will ask for an assessment of our work at the time the final report is issued (note – this is done for OPM-led reviews, agency-led reviews may wish to conduct a similar post-review survey).

Develop a working outline for the opening briefing, and include such topics as the background, purpose, and methodology of the evaluation as well as the products that will follow the virtual review. It may help to provide a copy of the briefing outline to top management in advance of the visit. The opening briefing then can be used to clarify any points in the outline and to concentrate on highlighting management's concerns.

Meeting With the HRM Staff

Following the management opening briefing, the team leader and all members usually conduct an orientation meeting with the HRM official to ensure an understanding of planned activities and to work out the remaining administrative aspects of the evaluation. Although much of this may have been addressed in previous contacts, this meeting provides a smooth start to the virtual review and is held to:

- Discuss the evaluation process and products, answer any questions, and obtain useful information on the organization not already received, or to further explore such things as mission, organizational characteristics, and major current or anticipated changes or plans which may affect the HRM program and the evaluation.
- Emphasize ground rules such as coordinating throughout the evaluation process to avoid any "surprises" at the end.
- Confirm/verify the administrative arrangements which were determined during the planning phase (such as access to talent and performance records; a process for transmitting and tracking team inquiries; scheduled times for daily agency update meetings, etc).
- Discuss any necessary adjustments to the evaluation agenda based on management input or new developments.
- Arrange for the organization's involvement and assistance in the evaluation. After concluding the opening briefing, have a team discussion on any new circumstances, management requests, and needed adjustments in the evaluation agenda, e.g., changes necessary because of the absence of key HRM or management personnel or the need to alter the interview schedule. Following this meeting, begin team assignments as outlined in the evaluation agenda.

Conducting Case Reviews

The team leader (or HCAAF system lead) will assign cases to team members. This reduces the possibility that team members will inadvertently select the same case to examine.

The evaluator will review case files identified during the pre-evaluation phase, using automated staffing systems, e-OPF, or an agency's automated performance system. The records review helps the evaluator to identify compliance problem areas and their scope, e.g., from a systemic problem caused by an erroneous agency policy to a single case file and/or an individual team member. Be sure to record the findings and save copies of supporting documents such as HR policies or procedures, vacancy announcements, job analyses, rating schedules, qualification determinations, applications, certificates, SF-50's, team member who handled the case file, etc.

As the evaluator reviews records, the evaluator may identify new investigative leads to pursue not identified during the pre-evaluation phase. Be flexible and adjust the evaluation to take into account new or different facts uncovered during the course of the evaluation (which may require additional case files reviewed).

For logistical purposes, the team leader may wish to establish a tracking and numbering system for the question sheets being electronically transmitted back and forth between the agency and the evaluation team.

Conducting Individual and Group Interviews

Through the interview process, the evaluator will obtain different 'takes' on the each HCF system from the perspectives of the HC and HR policy and planning levels to HR operations, to the customers, and from the executive to the front-line level. The information gathered from the interviews helps the evaluator assess how successful an agency is in strategically meeting the agency's Human Capital goals as well as complying with merit system principles and applicable laws and regulations. Be sure to take accurate notes during the interviews. NOTE: Another team member should be available during the interview to take notes, especially for group interviews.

The evaluator may identify new investigative leads to pursue not identified during the pre-evaluation phase. Be flexible and adjust the evaluation to take into account new or different facts uncovered during the course of the evaluation (which may require additional interviews).

During the interviews, pause and periodically ask if there are any questions. This is importance since body language is more difficult to read when using VTC or conference calling equipment. (NOTE – team needs to verify with POC that only scheduled individuals are present (e.g., no union reps, no unscheduled supervisors)

Conducting Team Meetings

The team leader should schedule and hold team meetings on a daily basis so that team members can report on their records review findings and the substance of their interviews. The team leader and members will be able to identify any over-arching themes (e.g., lack of strategic planning including workforce analysis or improper policies) and what further fact-finding is needed, if any, to validate findings or perceptions. The goal is not only to share information, but also to ensure that the team will have solid and valid information to support the team's assessment of each of the agency's HCF systems against the expected outcomes.

In most instances, the agency point of contact should be kept apprised of valid findings so the agency is not "surprised." There may be occasions involving a severe DEU, prohibited personnel practices, or similar serious findings that the team leader should discuss with his or her oversight management team to develop a communication strategy with the agency/installation.

Meeting With the HRM Staff

Transparency and communication are important throughout the evaluation process and in the close-out briefing. The evaluation team should hold a regular meeting each day to share findings. The agency point of contact should be kept apprised of findings so the agency is not "surprised."

Preparing for and Briefing Top Management, HC/HR Officials and Staffs on the Preliminary Findings

To prepare for the close-out briefing, the evaluator should aggregate the information found in the pre-evaluation and evaluation phase to assess if the agency met all key indicators of expected outcomes of critical success factors. Based on this analysis, assess whether or not the agency has met, partially met, or not met the expected outcome. Additionally, identify what data is still needed.

The close-out briefing is the opportunity to discuss the preliminary findings at the end of an evaluation. Depending on the circumstances (e.g., findings, availability, interest), the evaluator may hold more than one close-out briefing, e.g., one high-level briefing with top management and a second, more detailed briefing, with HC and/or HR officials and staffs. Preface the briefing by indicating that these are preliminary findings and indicate if additional fact-finding or research must be done. Do not share the actual paper document with the agency; however, they may take notes.

The close-out briefing should meet the expectations set during the opening briefing, communicate findings, and potential solutions to problems identified. Listen and take notes of the agency response to the preliminary findings. Respond to the agency's questions, but indicate if additional research or thought is needed.

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Suggested Arrangements for HRM Briefing

- When possible schedule the HRM briefing to occur prior to the top manager's briefing. After hearing the presentation, the HRM official may be able to advise you of a better way to present your findings to get top management agreement.
- Allow enough time to cover findings in greater technical detail than provided to top management.
- Suggest HRM participants, but leave the decision to the HRM official.
- Include team members and let them present their portion of the evaluation coverage.
- Bring problematic cases to the briefing for examples or to illustrate talking points.

Suggested Arrangements for Top Management Briefing

- Schedule the briefing prior to the evaluation. The amount of time available for the briefing depends on the top management official, but suggest one hour.
- Suggest organization participants, but leave the decision to the top manager. Possible participants are organization officials who may affect the outcome of the evaluation.
- Determine whether the team and O&E management should attend, keeping protocol in mind.

Additional Suggestions

- Make brief introductory comments that indicate an understanding of the agency's mission and operating environment.
- Start with positive findings. For example, acknowledge the part of the program that is working before covering the part that is not.
- Provide causal analysis to support each finding.
- Avoid emphasizing process issues not related to program or systemic concerns with top management, but discuss them in the HRM briefing.
- Avoid future surprises. Mention issues that you intend to follow-up on that were not sufficiently evaluated onsite.
- Explain how the solutions "recommended and required actions" will address an issue and (where possible) will have a positive impact on the work environment and mission.
- Significant major review findings may necessitate conducting an on-site out-briefing

Be sensitive to audience reactions, and adapt the presentation accordingly. This might involve pausing to clarify a point or adjusting the pace of the presentation.

- Ensure that your out-brief audience is engaged and active (e.g., check with your POC for reactions). Officials often spend more time than scheduled if they are engaged in constructive dialogue.
- During the briefing, pause and periodically ask if there are any questions. This is important since body language is more difficult to read when using VTC or conference calling equipment.
- Close the briefing by explaining when to expect the report, when to respond to the required actions, how OPM will follow-up on recommendations, and that MSAC evaluation assessment forms will be sent to the top management and HRM officials after issuance of the report.
- Reiterate that these are preliminary findings and that the organization can provide additional information for consideration prior to the issuance of the final report.

You may have to scale back or reschedule a briefing to accommodate an official's schedule or give yourself enough time for adequate preparation.

Things to Avoid

It is critical when conducting a virtual review to avoid review "creep". In your planning phase it is important to establish clear beginning and ending dates for conducting the virtual review. While on-line access may allow for greater access of records and scheduling meetings, the review team is impacting the local installation and should be operating within established timelines. Case and records sample size may increase unintentionally with longer reviews, and the team may expand the review over a greater period of time. Review teams always want to minimize the impact on the installation/agency work operations.

POST-EVALUATION PHASE FOR AN OFF-SITE/VIRTUAL REVIEW

The post-evaluation phase of conducting a virtual review should be the same as if the review was conducted on-site. The questions and contacts between the team leader and the installation POC can continue. Report writing should begin when the review is completed and the closeout has occurred.