

## Welcome to Your New Performance Standards – Alert #7

SSA has created new standards that will be used to evaluate your performance. **Performance standards** are a statement of the performance requirements or expectations for a critical element of a position that must be met in order to be appraised at a particular level of performance. The agency has written performance standards for Level 3 *Successful* and Level 5 *Outstanding* for each of the four performance elements (these are posted in their complete form on [www.afgecountil220.org](http://www.afgecountil220.org)). Performance that clearly does not meet the level 3 standard is considered Level 1 *Not Successful*. There is no written performance standard for Level 1.

**Performance standards** tell you how well you have to perform to be considered at the *Successful* and *Outstanding* levels in a performance element. **Performance elements** are supposed to be a statement of the work assignments and responsibilities of the position (formerly known as critical elements or GJTs). There are four performance elements for employees: *Interpersonal Skills*, *Participation*, *Demonstrates Job Knowledge*, and *Achieves Business Results*. Under previous appraisal systems, such elements were based on the position description or PD (e.g., interviews claimants in person or by phone, adjudicates claims and PE items, etc.). The current system is not based on the PD, and uses generic performance elements that apply to all or most SSA jobs.

A **critical element** is one that is so important that unsuccessful performance in that element means that the employee can be fired or demoted for performance after being given an opportunity to improve. For purposes of this article, the terms “critical element” and “performance element” are synonymous.

**What Aspects of Performance Are Looked At?** The three facets of performance that are generally looked at are *accuracy, productivity, and timeliness*. Management may also create a performance standard that measures *manner of performance*, which is not a measurement of performance results, but rather the manner that you used to obtain those results. Rating manner of performance is much more subjective than rating numbers of calls or claims, length of calls, or case processing time. Measuring accuracy can also be subjective because unfair managers may scrutinize the work of employees they don't like and gloss over the errors of others.

**What Does Meeting the Performance Standard Mean?** Keeping your job is dependent upon whether or not you meet the performance standards. These new performance standards are written in a very general way that guarantees subjective and potentially unfair or disparate ratings. By law, agency management has the authority to write performance standards. Their content is not negotiable. Whether your manager is a decent human being or a statistically driven *nudnik*, may determine how well you fare under this new appraisal system.

**Narrative Performance Standards** are performance requirements or expectations that are written in narrative form. An agency's performance standards, at a minimum, must be reasonably clear, achievable, and allow for accurate measurement.

**Numeric Performance Standards** are performance requirements or expectations that are expressed in numerical terms of how much, how many, how timely or how accurate (“to achieve Level 3: clear 10 RZs a week” or “you must adjudicate 85% of your RSI claims under 14 days”). You must meet the numbers when management incorporates numerics into the standard.

**Fair Application of Performance Standards:** Management must apply the performance standards and all aspects of the performance appraisal system fairly and equitably to all employees (See Article 3 Section 2A of the national contract: *All employees shall be treated fairly and equitably in all aspects of personnel management...*). Management should not set different performance demands, expectations, or standards for different employees, nor should management apply the performance standards unfairly or inequitably to different employees.

## **Numeric Performance Standards and the Use of Numeric Data**

**According to the contract:** *If the agency decides to use numerics as performance standards, they will be clearly defined as such (Article 21 Section 5D).* Listen carefully to the use of numbers in management's statement of the performance standards at staff and individual performance meetings. If the number is just a *goal* or something to shoot for, then it is not a performance standard. If the number is all or part of the performance standard that means you need to meet or exceed the number to achieve a particular rating level. You need to know the difference.

At the meetings with management, ask:

- Does the number equate to a level of performance? What level? Is there a numeric standard for level 5?
- Is the number actually a numeric a performance standard or just a "goal" to aim for? What happens if an employee does not meet the numeric for level 3? Are they failing?
- If there is more than one numeric for a level of performance, does the employee have to meet or exceed each of the numbers to be meeting the standard?

After the meetings, go to our union council website ([www.afgecouncil220.org](http://www.afgecouncil220.org)) and provide the following information: Region, office name (not DO code), position and grade. From the home page, click on *Who are we?*, then click on *First VP Charlie Estudillo* and provide us with information about how management is using numerics as discussed below.

The union wants to track any use of numerics for consistency and to be aware of the escalation of performance demands via new numeric performance standards. Numeric standards should be different for employees at different GS grade levels. Obviously employees at the lower GS levels should not be expected to attain the same numbers as more experienced employees in the same position at the higher grades. Likewise, any numeric should be the same for all full-time employees in the same position and at the same grade. Any numeric data used to measure performance should be consistent for all employees in the same position, grade, and unit configuration (generalists CRs, TSRs, SRs, and CRs with the same unit/work assignments). We have nationwide standard positions and national narrative performance standards.

Inform your Local President of any unfair, unattainable, or unfairly applied performance standards, such as trainees at a lower GS level being given the same production standards as 30-year veteran, GS-11 CRs. Any numeric data used to measure performance should be consistent for all employees in the same position, grade, and unit configuration (generalists CRs, TSRs, SRs, and CRs with the same unit/work assignments). We have nationwide standard positions and national narrative performance standards.

Numeric data is referred to a number of times in the agency's PPM Guide:

**Section 5.3: "Numeric Data** – Numeric data (e.g., the timeliness and /or accuracy of work or the need to produce a fair share of the workload) may be gathered and maintained in order to provide context to the performance standards and expectations." (page 6)

**Section 5.7. "Expectation Discussions** – (paragraph 2) Supervisors will use numerical data where relevant and applicable to provide context. For example, numerical data may be used to describe expectations regarding the timely and accurate processing of reasonable work assignments or expectation to define the fair share of the work." (page 16)

**Section 5.12. "Consideration of Numeric Data** – Supervisors should consider appropriate measures of performance in rating employees. Since data alone cannot capture the full extent of the employee's contributions, the use of numeric data should not be the exclusive measure of performance. Supervisors should be aware that numeric data can only measure certain aspects of performance; therefore, care should be taken when considering numeric data." (page 24)

Unfair or disparately applied performance standards are grievable. We will watch the application of this new appraisal system very closely and address problems as they develop. Stay tuned to the Council 220 website. We will be providing ongoing information and guidance as problems with the new appraisal system unfold.