Managing Employee Underperformance

Underperformance should be managed with clear expectations, relevant evidence and reasonable support. A person who has not been trained, properly supervised or given the tools they need should not be treated in the same way as someone deliberately refusing to follow instructions.

1. Identify what is not meeting the required standard

Describe the task, expected standard, actual outcome and effect on the business. Use examples rather than labels such as “poor attitude”. Check whether the role, equipment, working environment or manager’s instructions have changed.

Possible explanation	Appropriate first response
Insufficient training	Provide coaching, demonstration and a fair opportunity to practise.
Unclear performance measure	Define a measurable standard and timescale.
Disability or health-related difficulty	Explore reasonable adjustments and appropriate support.
Deliberate refusal to follow a reasonable instruction	Consider whether a conduct process is appropriate.

2. Start with an informal, supportive conversation

Ask the employee what may be preventing good performance. Agree a reasonable improvement period and provide the necessary resources. Keep a factual note of the discussion, support offered and the next review date.

3. Use a performance improvement plan when needed

An effective plan states the required improvement, objective measures, responsibilities, support and review dates. Make clear what may happen if improvement is insufficient, while keeping the focus on achieving the standard.

Example A | Repeated incomplete site reports

Reports are missing required safety fields. The employee was not shown the revised process when it changed.

Employer response: Provide the current instruction and supervised practice, then check completion against a documented standard at two agreed reviews.

4. Consider formal steps proportionately

Where improvement does not follow reasonable support, follow a fair capability or disciplinary process as appropriate. Review alternatives, adjustments and any suitable different role before a dismissal decision. Dismissal should be a last resort.

5. Keep decisions supported by evidence

Record performance expectations, feedback, training, reviews, employee comments, the improvement plan and outcome. Restrict confidential employee records and use the current policy consistently across sites.

How Assyst helps employers communicate expectations

Assyst's communications feature enables employers to generate formal letters to employees and retain those communications within the employee's HR record. Where performance needs to improve, managers and HR can formally set out the concerns, required standards, agreed improvement targets, support available and dates for review. Copies of letters and related correspondence remain in the system, creating a clear record of expectations and actions rather than relying solely on informal conversations. This helps employers communicate consistently and review whether the employee has met the agreed targets.

Discuss your workforce requirements with Assyst

Assyst Workforce Management is a workforce management platform for multi-site employers, bringing together HR and paperless onboarding, time and attendance, workforce scheduling, payroll calculations, task management and a mobile staff app. To find out more or discuss how Assyst could support your business, visit www.assyst.uk and contact us through the website.

Useful official sources

Acas — Problems with an employee’s performance
https://www.acas.org.uk/performance-management/problems-with-an-employees-performance

Acas — Dismissals for capability or conduct
https://www.acas.org.uk/performance-management/dismissals-for-capability-or-conduct

GOV.UK — Reasonable adjustments
https://www.gov.uk/reasonable-adjustments-for-disabled-workers

General guidance for employers in Great Britain, reviewed November 2026. Contract terms and individual circumstances may require professional advice.