

STRATEGIES: RECOGNITION

### You can be your own best reference

**Hang on to those words of praise in thank you cards and way-to-go notes: Creating a 'star file' offers proof of just how good you are**

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Shortly after Pamela Preston was hired as a financial adviser for Bank of Nova Scotia in 2002, she landed her first big account - and returned to her desk in Toronto to a gushing voice mail from her district manager.

"The message was loud and clear: recognizing my success, thanking me and encouraging similar behaviour in the future," Ms. Preston recalls.

She was so buoyed by that feel-good message that she saved it, replaying it over the next six months whenever she needed a boost.

Though she's since deleted it, Ms. Preston, now manager of coaching at Scotiabank, has continued to build an archive of accolades. She has amassed two files of glowing reports - one a cardboard folder stuffed with performance reviews, thank you cards, way-to-go notes and the like, and another a file on her computer filled with e-mails congratulating her for jobs well done.



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The recognition comes from different sources: team members when she has gone above and beyond, leaders of another unit grateful she took on a project, and clients, vendors and new recruits she has mentored, expressing appreciation.

All of these words of praise not only boost her ego, they show Ms. Preston how valuable she is to her employer. "I believe I'm a top performer, but these reviews and compliments are evidence of that fact," she says.

She has pointed to that evidence when sitting across from her employer during performance reviews, and showed it to hiring managers when she has sought promotions within the company.

There is no doubt that saving a paper trail of compliments is helping her career, she says.

She's not the only one. All over the working world, people are keeping secret stashes of plaudits - hanging on to boxes of congratulatory notes and e-mails on their hard drives.

Seventy-eight per cent of 6,161 respondents to an online Globe and Mail poll said that, when they receive written praise from their bosses, they make a point of keeping it.

Smart move, say the experts.

"Kind words are so hard to get rid of because they make you feel so good," says career coach Mark Franklin, president of Toronto-based CareerCycles. "They reignite our interest in work and remind us that what we do matters."

Everyone needs a little acknowledgment to perform consistently well, adds career coach Kelly Cowan, founder of Boost Creative Leadership Group Inc. in Markham, Ont.

"Whether you're having a bad day because the boss yelled, the product didn't launch or the funding got pulled, it's a real crash of spirit. Pulling out your 'star file' can put it all in perspective."

Such recognition can do more than give workers a spiritual shot in the arm, the pros say. A carefully preserved star file forms a record of accomplishments that helps employees track their own strengths, and provides concrete proof of their performance - whether to help convince an employer it's time for a promotion, a pay raise, a new position, or even to protect against being fired.

Bottom line: If you have lots of evidence showing how terrific you are, you become your own best reference, Mr. Franklin says.

When sales representative Tula Stewart lost her job in June at EMI Music Canada in Mississauga because of company cutbacks, she had already amassed a positive feedback file that spanned 18 years. "I saved notes from VPs of sales, my sales manager, and people within the department, all congratulating me for achieving sales targets," she says.

Whenever the notes came by e-mail, she made sure to send them to her home computer - and now she's glad she did.

"In my job search, I'll need letters of reference, and the people who wrote these wonderful notes are the people that can vouch for my talent and ability," she says.

Ms. Stewart is also considering toting a few of those accolades along to interviews, just in case a prospective employer is interested in what others have to say about her.

Many people do the same, so they can point to that praise as corroboration of their skills, says Mr. Franklin, adding that recognition from outside is more convincing than tooting your own horn.

"Often, interviewers will ask how well you work with others, and that's when it's timely to present an e-mail that says: 'Thanks, Sue, for putting on a terrific workshop - the participants loved it!'"

Those accolades also come in handy at performance review time, Ms. Cowan notes. Many employees write their own reviews, and present them to their managers, who then add further notes and comments. Employees who collect all the positive feedback they receive over the course of the year will have exactly what they need to write about their specific strengths, she says.

And when it's time to sit down with your manager to discuss the review, you can also use your star file to show that you really have been making a difference - and you're not the only one who thinks so, Mr. Franklin says.

Having concrete proof of your strengths may just keep you protected if you ever feel the need to defend yourself or your job.

"Most people don't start out saving letters of praise in case they get fired - you don't get married planning to divorce," Ms. Cowan says.

But, she notes, if there is a threat to your job, and you have been keeping track of the positive things people are saying to support you, you'll be ready.

These days, employers are commonly using e-mail to give workers feedback about their performance.

And employees who are smart enough to keep those way-to-go notes are pointing to them in cases of wrongful dismissal to prove they should not be fired, says Brian Johnston, who manages the labour and employment law group at law firm Stewart McKelvey in Halifax.

While for many years a single act of misconduct, such as dishonesty, could justify firing, courts are now looking at the total relationship between the employer and employee - which is evidenced not just by formal reviews but also by casual thank you notes and e-mails, Mr. Johnston says.

Take the case of Sandra Sigouin, who had worked for the National Bank of Canada in Ottawa for 20 years when she was promoted to administrative officer in special loans in July, 2005. Six months later, she was fired for committing an error that caused the bank to lose \$850,000.

She sued for wrongful dismissal. An adjudicator upheld the dismissal but, when she appealed to the Federal Court of Canada, it ruled, in a decision made public in April, that the adjudicator's decision was unreasonable for failing to take into account her unblemished employment record over two decades.

Her star file helped saved the day. "It revealed she had been an excellent employee for 20 years," Mr. Johnston says.

It also proved that Ms. Sigouin did not receive one negative comment until her promotion.

It was on the basis of her "impeccable record" of accolades that the court concluded she should not have been fired. The case was turned back to the adjudicator for a rehearing.

Since courts do consider informal notes and e-mails in analyzing whether an employee has been fired for just cause, Mr. Johnston recommends staffers keep as many written pats on the back from bosses, colleagues, customers and clients as they can.

For their part, employers should be careful when firing off notes of praise, Mr. Johnston says.

"With the proliferation of e-mails in the workplace, employers too often send casual or ill-considered notes that come back to haunt them later," Mr. Johnston says.

The lesson is to give compliments only when they are really due, and to document any negative comments about employees, even though "thank you e-mails are easier to write than here's-what-you've-done wrong e-mails."

Mr. Franklin estimates that anyone dealing one-on-one with clients for a few years will likely amass at least 100 notes of praise.

He has saved even more, and is so impressed by prospective associates who show him lots of thank you notes that he has hired them partly on that basis.

Ms. Preston finds it impossible to save every single note she receives. So which ones make the cut?

"The best comments are those that give you an emotional boost or have a specific example of your skill," Ms. Cowan says.

While Mr. Franklin says it's okay to let go of letters that have already been inserted into a performance review and now form part of the permanent record, he adds that you should "save anything that in the future you may say, 'Gee, I wish I would have kept that.'"

He suggests creating a portfolio of notes and e-mail printouts that are particularly praiseworthy - especially those from bosses or major clients.

With thank you e-mails, he'll sometimes cut and paste lines that mean the most and save them in one computer file named "Testimonials," with the quotes attributed to the writer and the date.

Indeed, with the proliferation of e-mail, the accolades threaten to get buried in your in-box, so it's smart to create one such separate file on your computer and cut and paste those accolades into it.

Mr. Franklin also recommends inserting three or four short quotes as bullet points directly into your résumé. "Under your list of accomplishments, add words that showcase your best skills, like those that attest to you being a consistent worker or creative thinker," he says.

For a particular job well done, many congratulatory cards may come, Ms. Preston says, and that's when being selective counts. She suggests saving those from the most senior person and those that show the qualities used to achieve results.

No matter how many accolades you do save, the key is not to let them turn yellow in a box, but to pull them out and read them, as much as you can, Ms. Cowan says. "People don't go back to these files often enough. They keep them around and wonder why."

As for those feel-good notes in a computer file, be sure to back them up right away, she warns. After a recent computer crash, every plaudit sent to her over the past year vanished.

Luckily, her old computer still houses all of the glowing e-mails she saved over the course of four years earlier, and now, she says, they are backed up and ready to be printed off - just in case she ever needs them.

Still, she feels a strong sense of loss. "It was like losing photos," she says. "These notes had the same emotional memory and, unfortunately, they can never be replaced."

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## **Creating a trail**

Use these tips from the career pros to create your own 'star file':

### **Build a portfolio**

Keep a hard file of performance reviews, notes and printed e-mails of thanks and praise, and a computer file titled something like Testimonials, where you add each positive e-mail received.

### **Safeguard**

After receiving e-mails, transfer them to your file ASAP. Also take the time to back up the file and/or send a copy to your home computer.

### **Select the best**

To avoid becoming a pack rat, be selective about saving. Keep notes from superiors and major clients. Also, save the ones that clearly outline your particular talents and skills, and point out how you applied them to get successful results.

#### Ask for references

Note senders are perfect candidates to act as references in your job search, since they are the ones who know firsthand what a stellar employee you are and why. It can't hurt to call and ask.

#### Show off

Don't be shy to pull out your praise during a job interview, or a meeting with your boss. Compliments from others pack more punch than tooting your own horn when applying for a position, negotiating for better pay or proving you're ready to move up the ranks.

#### Improve yourself

In addition to cutting and pasting positive feedback into your performance reviews, use it to understand and develop your strengths on a continuing basis. When you take on a new project, you can go back and remind yourself exactly what you did right the last time.

#### Pat yourself on the back

Read and reread the notes that make you feel warm and fuzzy inside whenever you need a quick ego boost or to put the ups and downs of life on the job in perspective.

#### Remember, words last

When writing positive feedback, employers should keep in mind that it will form a lasting record that an employee can and should use to protect against being fired. Avoid writing hasty performance reviews or firing off casual e-mails. Also take the time to send negative comments when they are deserved.

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