

What should you say?

The industry's been going through a tough time. Many of your friends and colleagues at other firms have been laid off or will be in the very near future. Others are taking pay cuts or working reduced hours. To date, your company has not announced any layoffs, but recognizing that the economy is probably going to get worse before it gets better you realize that something will happen soon. As you are involved in some sizable projects that are not ending anytime soon, you do not feel that your job is in jeopardy. However, recently your boss has begun asking you what you think about the performance and work of one of the other engineers in the office, Eric.

Eric's performance has come under scrutiny. He has been with the firm for about 10 years and is known to be a nice guy but lacking in technical knowledge and the ability to effectively interface with clients. While he has been around longer than you have, you discover that he only makes a fraction of what you do. Eric has taken his engineering licensure examination six times and has never been able to pass any portion of it. The management is aware of his failures and wonders why he cannot pass the test when everyone else in the office is able to do it on their first or second try. Licenses are particularly important to the firm since they are able to charge higher rates for work done by licensed engineers. Lastly, some clients have requested that Eric does not work on their projects. This request does not help with his reputation among company managers.

You've never worked with him directly on any of your previous projects but Eric has asked you to help him understand some technical aspects of his job. The questions that Eric asks of you are extremely elementary in nature. You really don't mind helping him, but you can't help think that this guy has an engineering degree yet he has no grasp of basic engineering principles. You think nothing of it and being the nice guy that you are try to help him out whenever you can. Sometimes you wonder if and how his performance affects the perception of the work done by the office. You also wonder why he's still around, but then you realize he's probably one of the lowest paid engineers on staff. Do Eric's actions influence client's opinions on our work quality? Are Eric's questions disruptive to the rest of the engineers on staff and reduce overall office productivity and moral? Would he be one of the first to go if cutbacks are required?

Your boss does not work directly with him, but does not seem to have a very high opinion of him. What should you tell him about Eric, his ability to perform his duties, and his future potential?