Performance Appraisal and Evaluation

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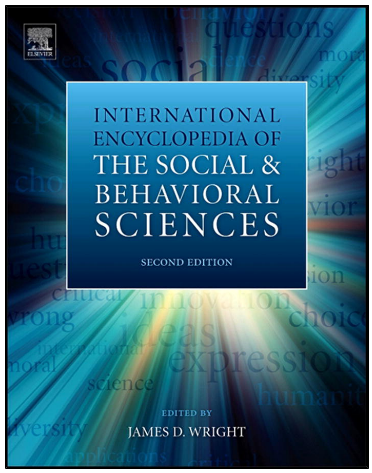

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Performance Appraisal and Evaluation

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Abstract

Performance appraisal (PA) refers to the methods and processes used by organizations to assess the level of performance of their employees and to provide them with a feedback. This process can be used for both developmental and administrative purposes. The research on PA includes examination of the psychometric aspects of the appraisal tools, the cognitive process and the biases involved, and the social context. Although PA is an important tool for managing employees, managers, and workers are rarely satisfied with it. Therefore, clearly defining the purposes of the PA and addressing the employees' reactions are essential to the success of the PA.

Definition of Performance Appraisal

Performance appraisal (PA) plays a central role in managing human resources in organizations (e.g., Boswell and Boudreau, 2002; Cardy and Dobbins, 1994; Judge and Ferris, 1993). The term performance appraisal (or performance evaluation) refers to the methods and processes used by organizations to assess the level of performance of their employees. This process usually includes measuring employees' performance and providing them with feedback regarding the level and quality of their performance (DeNisi and Pritchard, 2006). The main goal of the PA in organizations is to improve employee performance (DeNisi and Pritchard, 2006; Murphy and Cleveland, 1991). This goal could be achieved through three possible mechanisms: (1) the information provided by the PA can be used for administrative decisions linking the evaluated performance to organizational rewards or punishments such as a pay raise, promotion, or discharge (Cleveland et al., 1989; Landy and Farr, 1980; Raynes, Gerhart, & Parks, 2005); (2) the PA process involves providing performance feedback (i.e., information regarding the level of performance) to the employees who were evaluated, allowing them to adjust their performance strategies to match the desired performance (e.g., Erez, 1977; Kluger and DeNisi, 1996; Locke and Latham, 2002); and (3) the PA is a process that raises employee awareness to the fact that they are being measured. As has been shown since the Hawthtorne studies (Roethlisberger and Dickson, 1939) and is expressed in the aphorism "what gets measured gets done," the mere fact of knowing that one is being observed or measured increases performance and fosters cooperative behavior (Bateson et al., 2006; Haley and Fessler, 2005; Keller and Pfattheicher, 2011). While the first and second mechanisms of PA have been widely explored, the third has received little attention in the PA literature.

Criteria for PA Effectiveness

Assuming that the main purpose of the PA process is to increase performance, an effective PA would be one that achieves this purpose. However, it is not as obvious as it seems to establish the criteria for effective PA that lead to performance improvement: Does effective PA mean that the scales in use are accurate and free of rater biases? Or does it mean that the workers accept the PA results and are willing to change their manners accordingly? While early research focused primarily on the accuracy of ratings as the only criterion for PA effectiveness, recent studies have suggested focusing on motivational aspects such as ratees' reactions to the PA (e.g., satisfaction, feedback acceptance). In order for workers to improve their performance following an appraisal, they must accept the appraisal rating and be willing to change their performance accordingly. Ensuring workers' reactions such as satisfaction, commitment, acceptance of the appraisal, and trust in management could help organizations achieve the primary PA purpose of improving performance (Keeping and Levy, 2000; DeNisi and Pritchard, 2006; Mayer and Davis, 1999). In order to yield positive reactions among ratees, the PA process should be perceived as reliable, accurate, and free of political interests on the one hand, and allow the ratee to participate in the process and express his or her voice on the other. The shift from measuring the accuracy of the appraisals to measuring the ratees' reactions and motivations reflects a significant change in the research of PA (Levy and Williams, 2004). This shift will be discussed in the following section.

Changes in the Focus of Performance Appraisal Literature

Until the 1980s, the focus in the PA literature was on measurement development and the psychometric characteristics of the different tools used to evaluate performance (Arvey and Murfey, 1998; Landy and Farr, 1980). Specifically, most research was concerned with improving these tools, constructing rating scales, and examining the advantages and disadvantages of different types of ratings. This psychometric tradition changed dramatically in the early 1980s when the focus of research shifted to the cognitive characteristics of the raters (e.g., Feldman, 1981; Landy and Farr, 1980). Drawing on social cognition and cognitive psychology, researchers began to explore how raters create impressions and judgments of their subordinates (Arvey and Murfey, 1998). The PA literature has become more concerned with attribution errors, categorizations, stereotyping, and other biases involved in information processing (e.g., DeNisi et al., 1984; Dobbins et al., 1988; Feldman, 1981).

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Another historical change in the PA literature has occurred since the 1990s. At the beginning of the decade, several keynote reviews (e.g., Bretz et al., 1992; Ilgen et al., 1993; Murphy and Cleveland, 1991) argued that cognitive process models had failed to narrow the gap between research and practice, and since PA is an applied subject, there should be increased effort to make the research more applicative. The cognitive approach assumed that the cognitive process is universal and, therefore, the different content domains in which PAs practically occur (Ilgen et al., 1993) were overlooked. Researchers at this time suggested that in order to contribute to the practice of PA in organizations, it is important to understand the specific context in which an appraisal takes place, especially the social context (Levy and Williams, 2004). As the appraisal process takes place in a social context, it is, therefore, crucial to understand this context for appraisal success. The PA process is doomed to fail if the ratees perceive it as unfair or manipulative, even when the psychometric aspects of the process are valid (Cawley et al., 1998; Keeping and Levy, 2000; Levy and Williams, 2004). Some prominent components of the social context that influence the PA process will be reviewed further in this article, but first we introduce a key element in every PA system: feedback.

Performance Feedback

Providing employees with feedback regarding their performance is a common reality in most organizations. This type of feedback is defined as "actions taken by (an) external agent (s) to provide information regarding some aspect(s) of one's task performance" (Kluger and DeNisi, 1996: p. 255). This definition reflects the idea that feedback is 'information' or 'knowledge' delivered to an employee in order to make him or her aware of the level of their work outcomes. Performance feedback could serve as an important motivational source for workers if it is conducted effectively (Peiperl, 2001). Also, workers are interested in performance feedback in order to know how close they are to fulfilling their job assignments. However, giving (and receiving) feedback seems to be a challenging task. In the mid-1990s, Kluger and DeNisi (1996) published an extensive review and meta-analysis on the impact of feedback interventions. Their meta-analysis of feedback literature includes 131 articles and 607 feedback effects published between 1905 and 1996. Kluger and DeNisi found that in contrast to the common view that governed the feedback literature for nearly a hundred years, feedback does not always achieve its desired effect. Specifically, in more than a third (38%) of the studies reviewed, feedback was actually followed by a decrease in performance. Moreover, they found that the level of positivity or negativity of the feedback (i.e., feedback sign) does not explain why some feedback interventions were effective, while others were not. Lastly, the authors suggested and demonstrated that the level of the feedback (i.e., task details, task performance, and meta-level – the self) moderates the feedback–performance relationship. Specifically, effective feedback should help the receiver concentrate on the level of task performance, namely, the specific ways to improve his or her performance. Feedback often shifts the attention of the receiver from this level to a higher or a lower level; for example, the feedback could shift receiver attention to a higher level of the self (e.g., what this feedback says about me), or to a lower level of the task details (e.g., how I am holding my hands while teaching). The authors argued that feedback that either shifts attention to too high or too low a level, may be ineffective. This is mainly because people's cognitive resources are limited and if too much attention is invested on specific details or even worse, in one's self, there may not be enough resources available for performance improvement.

Recently, it was suggested (Van Dijk and Kluger, 2004, 2011) that the distinction between promotion and prevention goals or tasks (Higgins, 1997, 1998) could help defining the situations under which feedback will be effective. Specifically, tasks that are performed to satisfy one's wishes and aspirations (promotion tasks) benefit from positive feedback, while tasks performed to meet duties and obligations benefit from negative feedback. Practically, it suggests that one size does not fit all; thus, managers should tailor the feedback according to worker and task characteristics.

In light of the complexity of executing effective feedback processes, some researchers have suggested alternative interventions to feedback that focus on identifying conditions for success (e.g., Bouskila-Yam and Kluger, 2011; Kluger and Van Dijk, 2010). However, research on alternative interventions to feedback is only in its beginning stages, and the findings are not yet conclusive. Finding effective interventions to improve the feedback process remains one of the challenges for development in this field.

Multisource (360-Degree) Appraisal Technique

Multisource appraisal is one of the most widely used PA techniques in today's organizations (Antonioni, 1996). With this technique, the appraisal of an employee does not rely solely on one source (e.g., manager) but on multiple sources such as managers, peers, subordinates, and clients. Using the multisource technique helps evaluators collect a range of views regarding an employee's performance, with each source adding a unique perspective. For example, a manager can evaluate a nurse on professionalism and compliance to rules, a peer could evaluate how well he or she gets along with colleagues, and a patient could add information on how this nurse treats patients. With multisource feedback, the ratee usually receives the results along with normative data and self-ratings, providing the employee with comparative information (London and Smither, 1995). The purpose of the multisource appraisal is developmental (Brett and Atwater, 2001; DeNisi and Kluger, 2000), namely, to develop and nurture employees and to help them achieve their goals and aspirations, which eventually leads to a promotion focus. As such, use of multisource appraisals assumes to improve employee performance.

Some studies have reported improvements in overall performance following multisource appraisals or upward feedback (e.g., Atwater et al., 1995; Reilly et al., 1996). However, other studies (e.g., Brett and Atwater, 2001; Smither et al., 2005) questioned the effectiveness of this type of appraisal. Specifically, in a meta-analysis, Smither and colleagues (2005) found overall multisource feedback had a small effect on performance improvement. Furthermore, in a longitudinal study on multisource feedback, Brett and Atwater (2001) found that when ratings were low, employees reacted negatively, expressed anger, and rejected the feedback results. Even when ratings were high, employees did not show positive reactions, as would be expected, but rather, an absence of negative reactions. These findings are especially disappointing because the specific 360-degree feedback that was used in this study was developmental – it was designed to give useful information to the employees without any intention (or capacity) to use the data for other administrative purposes. Thus, despite some positive reported outcomes of the multisource appraisals, "the available data on the effectiveness of these programs is extremely limited, and the conclusions that we can draw from these studies are rather limited" (DeNisi and Kluger, 2000: p. 135).

The most difficult issue in PA is delivering negative feedback to an employee (Ilgen and Davis, 2000). Managers are not enthusiastic to give negative feedback, and employees find it very difficult to accept such feedback (especially if it contradicts their expectations). As a result, workers may become less cooperative and their work performance may suffer, preventing further work improvement and behavioral change. Reactions to negative feedback are influenced by individual differences in self-esteem, regulatory focus, goal orientation, and performance history (e.g., Brett and Atwater, 2001; Ilgen and Davis, 2000); therefore, these factors should be taken into account when negative feedback is given. In addition, the appraisal data should be used only for developmental purposes, and if other uses are considered, this fact should not be hidden from the employees because no PA system can work without mutual trust (DeNisi and Kluger, 2000; Mayer and Davis, 1999).

In view of the challenges and difficulties involved in the feedback process, it is clear that giving feedback demands a high degree of skill and knowledge. However, mastering interpersonal or communication skills is only one part in constituting an effective evaluation system. As mentioned earlier, the social context also is of great importance. This will be addressed next.

The Social Context of the PA Process

The social context in which the PA takes place is crucial to its success. The social context of the PA process consists of issues related to the rater, the ratee, and the relationship between them, as well as to global factors that indirectly affect the PA process such as the organizational culture, legal climate, human resource strategies, and organizational goals (Levy and Williams, 2004). In the following sections, we will review two of the social context factors that are essential to the success of the PA process: procedural justice and leadership.

Perceived Justice of Ratees

Perceived justice appears to be an essential mechanism through which appraisals affect employees' reactions (e.g., Erdogan, 2002; Greenberg, 1986); thus, this has received considerable attention in the PA literature. So how can appraisals be conducted in a fair manner? To answer this question, we need to examine two types of justice described in the literature of justice and fairness that are involved in the PA process: distributive justice and procedural justice. Distributive justice relates to the fairness of the appraisal relative to the exerted effort. Procedural justice relates to the fairness of the procedures that were used to determine the appraisal ratings (Greenberg, 1986). Levels of perceived procedural justice are positively related to important organizational outcomes such as organizational citizenship behavior (Ball et al., 1994; Moorman et al., 1998; Organ et al., 2006; Skarlicki and Latham, 1996, 1997; Whiting et al., 2008), trust in leadership (Barling and Philips, 1993; Folger and Konovsky, 1989; Whiting et al., 2008), organizational commitment, job satisfaction, and performance (Colquitt et al., 2001; Korsgaard et al., 1995).

Folger et al. (1992) have offered a comprehensive model that presents the key variables for designing a procedurally just PA system – the due process model. This model consists of three elements: adequate notice, fair hearing, and judgment based on evidence. Accordingly, the standards for evaluation should be evidence-based, employees should receive early notice about the evaluation standards, and consistent periodical feedback should be given to employees regarding their performance. In addition, employees should be given an opportunity to influence the process during evaluation meetings and to present their opinions (voice).

Several studies have found support for the due process model. Specifically, Taylor and colleagues (Taylor et al., 1998) examined employee–manager pairs that were randomly assigned to two types of evaluations: the customary existing appraisal process versus the due process appraisal. Employees involved in the due process appraisals displayed more positive reactions (e.g., perceived fairness, evaluation of the manager, intention to remain in the organization) than employees in the customary appraisals, even though the evaluations in the due process procedure were actually lower. Further support for the due process model has been found in other studies (e.g., Erdogan et al., 2001; Poon, 2004). Erdogan and colleagues found that characteristics of the due process appraisal (evidence-based criteria and fair hearing) were associated with perceived procedural justice. In addition, Poon (2004) found that when employees perceived the PA process as manipulative and skewed by the political interests of the raters (as opposed to the due process), they demonstrated less satisfaction and higher intention to quit their jobs.

Though the due process guidelines are clear, building a PA system accordingly is a significant challenge, as the performances of different workers are not always comparable and cannot be tested in a similar manner. Unlike student evaluations in which all students receive one standard test at the same time under the same conditions, managers attempting to evaluate their workers face a completely different situation. They do not always have the opportunity to observe all their workers for the same amount of time, and workers are not always performing comparable tasks in terms of difficulty and complexity. Moreover, with today's globalization, managers often supervise their workers from a distance without sufficient opportunity to observe their work, which makes this process even more challenging. Moreover, biases and impression management tactics seem to impact the ratings (e.g., Dulebohn and Ferris, 1999).

Therefore, research in recent years has striven to understand the factors affecting the perceived procedural fairness of PA systems (Erdogan, 2002; Erdogan et al., 2001; Folger et al., 1992) including factors concerning the rater's personality and perceptions (Heslin and VandeWalle, 2011; Mayer et al., 2007), which affect perceived procedural justice. Specifically, managers who exhibit high levels of conscientiousness and agreeableness, in combination with low levels of neuroticism (Mayer et al., 2007), and believe that workers are capable of change (Heslin and VandeWalle, 2011) are perceived as more procedurally just.

Leadership Effect on PA Effectiveness

Another contextual factor influencing the effectiveness of a PA is the manager's leadership behavior (Elicker et al., 2006; Gabris and Ihrke, 2001; Purcell and Hutchinson, 2007; Waldman et al., 1987). More specifically, the exchange relationship between the managers (who perform the evaluation) and their employees (those being evaluated) strongly affects the reactions of the employees to the PA process. The PA session is a 'contact point' (Holbrook, 2002) that is influenced by the existing exchange relationship (Elicker et al., 2006) and by leadership credibility (Gabris and Ihrke, 2001).

The literature on leader–member exchange (LMX) has contributed to our understanding of supervisor–subordinate relationships (Gerstner and Day, 1997; Graen et al., 2006) and their impact on various organizational outcomes (e.g., Fairhurst, 1993; Kacmar et al., 2003; Kark and Van Dijk, 2008). Specifically, the LMX model identifies the supervisor–subordinate relationship as a dyadic social exchange process that is unique to each supervisor–subordinate pair (Graen and Uhl-Bien, 1995). When LMX is high (in-group), the worker receives more attention and support from his or her leader, their relationship is close and warm, and they trust each other. As a result, the worker demonstrates a higher level of performance and has a positive attitude compared with a worker with low LMX (out-group). Given the initial warm and supportive relationship between managers and their in-group workers, it is obvious that during PA sessions, the workers with high LMX will be more confident in their ability to communicate with their managers and, therefore, will achieve more positive outcomes than the out-group workers.

Elicker and colleagues (Elicker et al., 2006) have found that the opportunity for an employee's voice and his or her perception of justice are important mechanisms for the effect of LMX on his or her reaction to a PA. Specifically, they found that the quality of the exchange relationship between leaders and workers affects the opportunity of the workers to voice opinions during a PA session, and as a result, increases the perception of justice, and this perception, in turn, influences workers' attitudes toward the PA process (i.e., motivation, satisfaction, perceived accuracy, and perceived utility). Besides LMX, other leadership behaviors are also found to influence the effectiveness of the PA process. Specifically, transformational leadership has been related to satisfaction with the PA process, whereas transactional leadership has been related to lower satisfaction (Waldman et al., 1987).

Both leadership and procedural justice are important contextual factors influencing the PA success; therefore, attention should be given to these issues while conducting PAs in an organization.

Summary

In this article, we have pointed out some landmarks in the PA literature and discussed the factors threatening the PA process success. Raters' judgment biases and lack of accuracy of the ratings threaten the PA validity. The organizational conditions, which often limit opportunities to observe all workers sufficiently, threaten the procedural justice. Also, the rater does not always master the delicate skills needed for providing effective feedback, and lastly, leadership biases, such as preferring in-group members, are also a possible threat to this process.

PA processes present numerous difficulties and obstacles (e.g., DeNisi et al., 1984; DeNisi and Peters, 1996; Feldman, 1981; Kluger and DeNisi, 1996), and it is safe to say that managers and workers are generally not very satisfied with it (e.g., Bouskila-Yam and Kluger, 2011; Coens and Jenkins, 2002; Peiperl, 2001; Smither et al., 2005). Yet, organizations do not seem to be in a hurry to cancel these evaluations, and existing alternatives are not being adopted. Is this an unfortunate mistake? Possibly, but it is also likely that one of the reasons why the PA process persists is that during it, workers are told who has been successful and who has not, who has reached the top and who is left behind, who has excelled, who is appreciated, and who has achieved something meaningful. By doing this, the PA process relates to the most basic motivational processes that drive people to work in the first place.

See also: Human Resource Management, Psychology of; Industrial–Organizational Psychology: Science and Practice; Job Design and Evaluation: Organizational Aspects; Organizational Behavior, Psychology of; Personnel Selection, Psychology of.

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