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Performance management: Quo Vadis?

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Traditionally performance management has been described as a powerful tool in Human Resource Management (HRM) because it has potentially a wide array of application possibilities for various HR topics. However, the reality in practice is different. Various surveys reported that more than 90 percent of the performance management systems are unsuccessful. Further studies have shown that up to 75% of staff feel that their organization's performance management system does not help them to improve their performance and is largely a waste of time (e.g., Capelli & Tavis, 2016; Pulakos, 2009). Economic analyses of the return on investment (as compared to the costs and time spent) on performance management activities appear to confirm these negative perceptions (e.g., CEB, 2012). What are the reasons for failure in the area of performance management? In this article, we aim to identify the main problems with the current performance management systems. At the same time, we aim to present a wide array of possible solutions to these recurring issues. All of this should further stimulate the debate about how to revamp performance management systems in organizations.

Performance Management: An Overview of Recurring Problems

Resistance of Key Stakeholders

A first core problem is that both employees and line managers have a strong resistance to performance management systems (De Nisi & Sonesh, 2011). Instead of being motivating and encouraging, line managers find giving and receiving (negative) feedback frustrating. It is like a "feared dental appointment" (Baer, 2014). They often try to avoid, postpone or soften giving (negative) feedback. In any case, line managers are at least said to be nervous when the time of the performance management meetings arises. Especially, this is the case if there is no trustful relationship between employee and supervisor.

From their part, employees also tend to react defensively to negative feedback. They dismiss the feedback offered as incorrect and attribute their failure to external factors, such as

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the bad mood of the line manager or the negative attitude of colleagues. This defensive

attitude has a negative impact on the feedback process (Moss & Sanchez, 2004). This is even

confirmed by neuroscientific research: evaluations induce a flight or fight response among

employees, which often leads to lower performance afterwards (Rock, 2008; Rock & Jones,

2015).

These dynamics create a "feedback gap" (Moss & Sanchez, 2004). Thus, a lot of

managers are reluctant to give feedback and employees do not seek feedback from their

manager. It is therefore not surprising that empirical research confirms that giving feedback

does not always improve employee performance. This is confirmed by a meta-analysis that

shows that in 1/3 of the cases where feedback is offered to employees, performance even

decreases; in a 1/3 there is no effect, and only in the remaining 1/3 there is a positive effect

(Alvero, Bucklin, & Austin, 2001; Kluger & DeNisi, 1996).

Conflicting Objectives

A second major problem is that performance management systems often have two

conflicting objectives. That is, about 70% of organizations use performance management as a

starting point for feedback (and thus for development and coaching) as well as for

administrative decisions (e.g., compensation or promotion; Cleveland, Murphy, & Williams,

1989). This is problematic, because research shows that such a double and conflicting use of

performance management is disastrous for both objectives (see for example Boswell &

Boudreau, 2002). How can you expect employees to be honest about their weaknesses

(development) when they know that this could affect their salary or promotion chances? This

double focus erodes the system.

Other 'Implicit' Motives

Current systems are often too focused on psychometric qualities. However, the

supervisor often has little concern for accurate assessments. When making assessments,

he/she has many other objectives in mind (see Murphy & Cleveland, 1995). For example, by

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giving high ratings, he/she wants to maintain the good atmosphere in his/her team. Or by giving almost everyone a good to very good assessment, he/she does not want to come across as incompetent and might want to increase one's own reputation and the reputation of the workgroup in the organization. Thus, some have argued that political or social factors are more important drivers of performance ratings than intentions to provide accurate ratings or to differentiate well between employees (Adler et al., 2016; see also Pulakos & O'Leary, 2011). It is clear that many existing performance management systems do not take those implicit objectives of managers into account.

Administration and Complexity

Many performance management approaches in organizations have grown into cumbersome complex systems (Levy, Tseng, Rosen, & Lueke, 2017). This manifests itself, for example, in complex assessment forms in which too many competencies have to be assessed. In addition, both parties typically have to discuss a large set of meticulously worded objectives. The time-consuming "multisource feedback carousel" is another example where managers assess a large number of employees each year. Typically, this administrative performance management mill starts once a year. No single party (line manager and employee) looks forward to this annual rush to carry out the performance appraisals in each department. After that, everything comes to a standstill again. Many feel that formal performance appraisal is thus separated from daily work.

Lack of Strategic Impact

Today, organizations must have the ability to respond with agility to rapidly changing environmental demands. That's why the objectives are often no longer relevant after six months. Project-based work also contributes to this (Levy et al., 2017). In short, feedback and evaluation processes are at odds with the dynamic work cycles in organizations.

As a result of the above-mentioned problems, performance management is also often used to de facto confirm and justify a decision already taken (e.g. promotion or dismissal). In

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performance management, there is often a 'lag' between performance management ratings and HR decisions. In concrete terms, a manager will rate someone highly because (s)he has already decided for himself that that person will be promoted (see also Pulakos, Mueller-Hanson, Arad, & Moye, 2015). Such a "lag" relationship between performance management and other HR decisions illustrates the lack of strategic impact of performance management and actually goes against the essence of performance management (i.e., in terms of its vertical and horizontal integration in the objectives of the organization and HR policy).

Lack of Support from Senior Management

Line managers and senior/top management should understand, accept, and be able and willing to carry out their part of the program. This is only possible if senior/top management actively participates in the implementation and support of the performance management program. However, clear support from senior/top management in the implementation of the performance management program is often lacking. Senior/top management might approve the performance management system but is not itself evaluated according to it.

Performance Management Solutions

What can organizations do to address these recurring problems? In what follows, we discuss a range of possible solutions (see also Pulakos, Mueller-Hanson, & Arad, 2019; Schleicher, Baumann, Sullivan, & Yim, 2019). We place them on a continuum. On one hand, there are strategies that are still close to the core of performance management as we discussed above. On the other hand, there are solutions that imply a radical turnaround.

System Technical Upgrades

The first and most traditional solution is to make the performance management system even more objective, so as to avoid resistance and negative reactions. This means providing the manager (assessor) with even more detailed guidelines (training) and tools (instruments) so that the quality (reliability and validity) of the assessments is improved.

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To this end, the following system technical upgrades might be deployed: (1) one developed a standardized assessment instrument to make assessments across different people comparable; (2) one checked whether the criteria to be assessed are relevant to the job and are unambiguously defined in terms of concrete observable behavior; (3) one makes performance levels explicit by means of examples per competency, and (4) one develops a system with an orientation towards the future, so that the development of the individual is compared from year to year.

Unfortunately, this first solution only tackles possible measurement shortcomings in performance assessment. The problem here is that they do not address the deeper underlying structural problems. This solution further ignores the fact that performance management is essentially a communication process rather than a measurement process. Good tools and thorough training of assessors are therefore insufficient prerequisites for a meaningful performance management system. The success of this first solution is therefore not at all certain. Pulakos et al. (2015) summarize this well: "For over 50 years, we have repeatedly attempted to address dissatisfaction and disappointing PM results (e.g., lack of differentiation among employees) by tweaking PM systems. These attempts to fix PM have led to vicious cycles of reinventing PM processes only to achieve disappointing results and then reinventing these processes again and again" (p. 52).

Reengineering

A second solution aims to reduce the complexity of performance management (e.g., Pulakos et al., 2019). Three basic principles underlie the reengineering logic. First, an evidence-based approach is used as a yardstick for reducing complexity. Second, the aim is to retain only those steps and aspects that provide real added value for the organization. In this reengineering logic, for example, organizations abandon the complex SMART process in order to determine the objectives to be achieved. They replace it with SIMple, which stands for Specific, Important and Measurable. As another example, only three objectives are set per

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term, which are truly crucial for both the individual and the organization. Moreover, rankings instead of assessment scales are used. Third, the process must radiate transparency and accountability. For example, transparency might be increased because performance appraisal results are shared with everyone at group level. Accountability might be improved by not paying out a bonus to a manager if (s)he has not assessed his team.

This reengineering solution is increasingly popular because it goes against the bureaucracy and administrative burden that performance management often entails. For example, the book *One page talent management* (Effron & Ort, 2010) became a bestseller.

Separation Between Performance Management Purposes

This third solution proposes a clear distinction between organizational (between people decisions) and individual applications of performance management (within people decisions). There should be no more contamination between these two objectives. An organization can achieve this by having two types of interviews/meetings. Employees must be informed clearly in advance about the formal separation between these two meetings. They must also be aware of the fact that the implications of each meeting differ. That is, the first type of interview (appraisal interview) relates to performance appraisal with effects on remuneration and promotion. Such interviews are held only once a year and are recorded in writing. The manager clearly has the role of an assessor. The second type of interview (coaching interview) focuses on individual feedback about strengths and weaknesses. This interview is held by a career expert (if there is one) or by the manager in the role of a counselor. It can take place several times a year and does not always lead to a written report. Such an interview gives rise to the aforementioned individual development plans or personal development plans. These plans try to find a fit between the organization and the individual. Note that self-assessment, lateral assessment and multisource feedback are best used only within the coaching interview. These forms of assessment and feedback trigger a communication process.

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A problem with this solution is that the first interview (the pure appraisal interview) is still subject to some of the listed problems. This does not stand in the way of development-oriented initiatives because this component is completely separate from these problems. Empirical research supports the usefulness and value of this third solution (Bettenhausen & Fedor, 1997). Fletcher (2001) even found that multisource feedback programs systematically fail when used for assessment and reward (and not just for development).

Informal Feedback: Check-ins and Feedback Culture

In the fourth and most radical solution, organizations abandon the entire system of formal and periodic performance reviews and replaced it with informal feedback (Culbert & Rout, 2010). Informal feedback can best be described as follows: Managers express their expectations on a weekly basis (also known as weekly "check-ins", "continuous review systems", "checkpoints", or "regular touch points") and provide direct and informal feedback (according to the motto: "Giving feedback is like serving champagne, it's best to serve champagne when it's still sparkling"). The focus of the feedback is always future-oriented and targeted to employee development. No written notes are made or kept.

If organizations follow these recommendations, this creates a favorable feedback environment for employees, also known as a feedback culture (Levy & Williams, 2004). In recent years, the use of a 'system' of informal feedback has increased considerably. Companies like Deloitte, Gap, Microsoft, Adobe, and PwC have been forerunners (e.g., Culbert & Rout 2010; Cunningham 2015). As we have already stated, some organizations opt for this because the formal system simply does not work or is being eroded (see the above-mentioned problems). Notably, informal feedback is easy to handle and does not involve any administrative paperwork. Often a mobile app like "Anytime feedback" supports this process.

For the time being, most positive evidence about the effects of informal feedback is based on case studies (e.g., Aguinis 2013; CEB 2004; Kirkland & Manoogian, 2007; Gregory, Levy, & Jeffers, 2008). For example, frequent informal feedback seems more in line with the

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agility required of today's organizations. However, there are also possible drawbacks. For example, in organizations in which the use of formal feedback was eliminated, top performers reported reduced satisfaction (Levy et al., 2017). Another tricky point is on what basis organizations without a formal performance management system can make objective decisions about salary increases, promotions, and dismissals (see Cappelli & Tavis, 2016). Some scholars (e.g., Adler et al., 2016) have argued that such decisions will then still build upon evaluations of employees' performance, even if these evaluations might take the form of implicit mental models on behalf of the supervisors. In sum, more systematic research in organizations is required to further demonstrate the effectiveness of it.

Focus on Strengths vs. Weaknesses: Feedforward and Reflected Best Self Portrait

On the basis of positive psychology, a movement (The Positive Organization; Positive HRM) has been set in motion in performance management that aims to identify and develop people's strengths rather than highlighting their weaknesses (Aguinis, Gottfredson, & Joo, 2012; Buckingham & Goodall, 2015). The reason is that people have already heard enough about their weaknesses and are often reluctant to respond to negative feedback. As a result, corrective feedback often leads to dissatisfaction, defensive reactions and less actual behavioral change. In terms of theoretical underpinning, this movement is based on the principle of so-called appreciative inquiry (Bushe & Kassam, 2005; Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987). In other words: build and change an organization on the basis of what works and not on the basis of things that do not work properly.

This movement does not state that negative feedback should not be given in organizations. Such corrective feedback is needed for poor performers. However, negative feedback makes little sense for talented employees. For instance, what is the point of telling an excellent defender to work on his scoring ability? According to the proponents, positive feedback and thus a focus on people's strengths increases their individual well-being, involvement and productivity (Clifton & Harter, 2003). However, there is a danger that

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people overinvest in their strengths ("too much of a good thing" effect). For instance, a person can develop his adaptability to such an extent that he is seen as someone who always wants to change everything, so that stability is hard to find.

Feedforward is one way to focus on strengths rather than weaknesses. An evaluation conversation too often results in a 'fight' in which both parties mainly argue about past performance and behavior, it is proposed to replace this traditional conversation with, or at least complement it with a feedforward conversation (Kluger & Nir, 2010). In such a conversation, the employee has the most say. He is asked to tell the story of concrete successes in which he was at his best. The emphasis is not on the result achieved, but on the feeling (positive emotions and flow) that employees had when they carried out the activity. In simple terms, it comes down to employees telling about their best day(s) at work in the past year. In this way, the broader circumstances are identified in which employees could best work in the future. Thus, there is a strong emphasis on positive aspects, on creating a bond of trust between managers and employees and a psychologically safe environment for information exchange. Consequently, both parties are prepared to review their ideas about each other, and this dialogue should facilitate change. Feedforward increased the commitment of employees and the interpersonal relationship with their managers (Bouskila-Yam & Kluger, 2011; Budworth, Latham, & Manroop, 2015). Feedforward also did this better than the traditional feedback method in a performance appraisal. Research into feedforward is gradually getting under way.

In addition to feedforward, the method of reflected best self-portrait ("self-portrait of how a target person is at his best"; Roberts, Dutton, Spreitzer, Heaphy, & Quinn, 2005) also plays into this strength-based movement. A reflected best self-portrait is based on the qualities and characteristics that the target person currently effectively possesses; it is not an ideal self-image. Because it is not always easy to determine the strengths yourself (e.g. based on the popular Clifton Strengths questionnaire), the target person asks family, friends, teachers,

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supervisor, and colleagues for feedback about their strengths. (S)he asks them to write short stories about their strengths. In this way, the target person gets specific examples of moments when he used those strengths in a meaningful way. Afterwards, the target person adds his/her own observations and searches for common themes in all of this. As an end result, the target person writes a description of themselves that summarizes the collected information. This self-description starts with: "I am at my best as ..." and can be used to make adjustments to the function and work context.

Gamification

Gamification is also gaining ground in the field of performance management (Armstrong, Landers, & Collmus, 2016; Cardador, Northcraft, & Whicker, 2016). The underlying reason is simple: The use of game-based principles in performance management improves work motivation and performance by giving more access to visible, comparable and immediate (on-demand) performance information. It also gives additional recognition to employees. As a result, these gamification principles appeal to the new generations of employees who have grown up with games. Notably, an important factor for success is that participation in the game is optional: this motivates more to play.

Organizations can apply gamification in many ways in performance management. Some organizations set up "leaderboards" of the best performers. For example, a leaderboard indicates which staff member scores the highest on customer friendliness or sales performance. With these leaderboards, organizations can adjust the allocation of points according to their objectives. In this way they can clarify the relative importance of different tasks by giving each task a certain number of points. Employees rise on the leaderboard depending on the points they earn. Logically, employees will focus on tasks that score a lot of points (and as a consequence, the organization attaches the most importance to them).

Other organizations apply gamification principles by working with "badges". Employees receive specific badges when they acquire important skills or meet predefined

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performance standards. Avatars show the status of each player (e.g. in terms of experience and knowledge) and employees know who they can turn to for help or information. It is clear that gamification competition can be conducive. That's why more research is needed to show for which people and objectives gamification works best in performance management.

Epilogue

For many years, performance management was one of the most static HR domains. In the last decade, this has vastly changed. It has emerged as one of the most innovative areas in which organizations experiment with a variety of approaches. In this paper, we discussed the reasons why many management performance systems fail. We uncovered the following key reasons: resistance of key stakeholders, conflicting objectives, implicit objectives, high system complexity, lack of support from senior management, and lack of strategic impact. At the same time, we present a wide array of traditional and more innovative possible solutions such as system technical upgrades (e.g., higher system objectivity or less complex performance management systems), separation between performance management purposes, and the integration of an informal feedback culture.

We are convinced that the future of performance management consists of blending traditional approaches with more recent insights. As an example of such a hybrid approach, organizations might implement a system of instant continuous informal feedback during the year (supported by mobile technology) and a formal assessment at least once a year. Through instant feedback one has access to more concrete check points, which track employee performance over time. This also makes the final assessment less dependent on recent events. All this then increases the accuracy as well as the acceptance of the end result.

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