

THE INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF BUSINESS & MANAGEMENT

A Qualitative Study to Evaluate the Purpose and Comprehensiveness of the British Army's Annual Individual Performance Appraisal System

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Abstract:

The British Army has undergone a major restructuring programme in recent times, whilst trying to withdraw from a major theatre of conflict. Their employees, the soldiers, are expected to deliver in diverse roles and perform to a high standard. Their performance will have an impact on the lives of those around them, if not properly managed. A tool that is used is the performance appraisal, which formulises a soldier's past performance and their prospects for the future. The Performance Appraisal System (PAS), when used correctly, can have a positive impact on a soldier's motivation and provide a useful guidance tool for their future employability and development. The research confirms what employees within the Army believe to be the purpose and comprehensiveness of the current PAS. The research ascertains whether the current PAS is a useful motivational tool and the overall effects the appraisal has toward performance. This research highlights the need for competence and experience from the appraiser, whilst recognising that the appraisee must play an active role in ensuring that their goals, ambitions and needs are understood by their line manager.

1. Introduction

This research project aims to understand the phenomenon behind the Performance Appraisal System (PAS) within the context of an organisation that has just undergone a restructuring program. It will use a qualitative, purposive research method to analyse the approach the British Army uses within their PAS.

The research aims to confirm what employees within the Army believe to be the purpose and comprehensiveness of the current PAS. The research will ascertain whether the current PAS is a useful motivational tool and the overall effects the appraisal has toward performance. This research highlights the need for competence and experience from the appraiser, whilst recognizing that the appraisee must play an active role in ensuring that their goals, ambitions and needs are understood by their line manager.

2. Background

The importance to any organisation in appraising their staff, in both public and private sectors, plays a vital role in aligning an employee's potential and performance with organisational goals (Muczyk, 1987; Ikramullah, Shah, Khan, ul Hassan and Zaman, 2012; Manning and Reece, 2003; Iqbal, 2012). Ikramullah et al (2012, p.143) highlighted that the PAS is one of the most important human resource management (HRM) functions in any organisation as it can fulfil many purposes, for example: "furnishing concerned authorities with information for making decisions, like pay, promotion decisions, training & development, and documentation for legal purposes." The PASs core function is to improve employee's performance by reviewing past performance and set objectives for the subsequent year. Also, it can supply evidence about employees that should be considered for termination, gives the ability to provide timely performance feedback and establish the successful criteria required for each role (Muczyk, 1987; Ikramullah et al, 2012; Manning and Reece, 2003; Iqbal, 2012; Pelissero, 1984).

By the middle of 2015 the British Army will have just concluded a series of redundancy tranches, which will reduce their manpower by 20% (HM Treasury, 2010; Cameron & Clegg, 2010). This will require the British Army to become more efficient and effective with their remaining manpower in order to continue to serve the country's needs. The unavoidable restructuring and redefining of the organisation will require a holistic approach to ensure that all aspects have been reviewed. Arguably one of the more pressing reviews is that the current PAS is in place in order to ensure that its full purpose is realised.

2.1. British Army's PAS Literature

The British Army recognises that the PAS is an important leadership task that ensures there is a continual transaction of honest views between the employee and their line manager, which allows for individual development and efficient use of valuable manpower resources (MOD, 2013; Walton, 2014). The PAS adopted by the Army has two primary purposes, which are concerned with (1) performance and potential, and (2) promotion and suitability for further and future employment (MOD, 2013). The appraisal is based on the opinion of the reporting officer, which can be supported by previous notes or consultation with third parties (MOD, 2013). The latter is not mandatory. However, certain headquarters direct their staff to complete grading conferences to ensure all personnel are fairly graded against their peers (Walton, 2014).

The appraisal is conducted over a yearlong period and commences with an initial interview, whereby the appraiser ensures the subject is conversant with their responsibilities and personal objectives. Although there should be continual liaison between the appraiser and appraisee, there is a formal mid-period appraisal review that establishes the progress made toward their goals and any areas that will need to be rectified. When the annual report is complete the appraisee has an opportunity to comment prior to it being passed up the reporting chain to the Army personnel centre, where they will be considered for training and promotion (MOD, 2013).

3. Research Gap

Performance appraisals have been a popular subject in research where academics have aimed to examine the purpose (Ikramullah et al, 2012; Iqbal, 2012) and understand the effects of differing appraisals (Muczyk, 1987; Dusterhoff, Cunningham and MacGregor, 2014). Also, academics have looked into comparing military appraisals with that of their civilian counterparts (Pelissero, 1984), as well as the importance of conducting a PAS in a changing environment (Rees and Eldridge, 2007). However, studies are yet to evaluate the purpose and comprehensiveness of the British Army's individual performance appraisal system in light of the climax to the redundancy tranches and in preparation towards the 2020 restructuring.

This research will impact the military effectiveness of its employees by reviewing the current PAS. Additionally, this research will have an international impact on other military countries, as well as other public and private organisations, that are currently undergoing similar restructuring programmes. Senior Officers within the British Army will benefit from this study, as they will be able to realise the full potential of a comprehensive PAS and the positive impacts that can be achieved. This study will aim to ensure that the PAS can help maximise the performance of the appraisee after a period of restructuring.

4. Research Questions

The PASs core purpose is to improve employee's performance by reviewing past performance, thereby establishing a set of objectives for the subsequent year. Also, the PAS has multiple secondary purposes that can supply evidence about employees that should be considered for promotion and termination, pay, training and development, documentation for legal purposes, and the establishment of successful criteria that is required for each role (Muczyk, 1987; Ikramullah et al, 2012; Manning and Reece, 2003; Iqbal, 2012; Pelissero, 1984). Therefore, in order to conduct a qualitative study and evaluate both the purpose and comprehensiveness of the British Army's annual individual performance appraisal system one will need to put forward the following questions:

- Research Question 1: What is the full purpose of the current PAS incorporated by the British Army and is this realised throughout?
- Research Question 2: Could the current PAS be more comprehensive in achieving its aims?
- Research Question 3: What effect does the current PAS have on the motivation of the appraisee?
- Research Question 4: Do the management and employees feel that the current PAS has an effect on the appraisee's performance?
- Research Question 5: What effect does the current PAS have on the appraiser?

5. Research Objectives

The primary objective of the research would be to answer the five questions detailed in the previous section, which would systematically lead onto the following objectives:

- Provide sufficient detail to allow for a subsequent quantitative scientific study.
- In light of a recent organisational restructure, determine whether the full purpose of PAS is being achieved, which will also allow for generalised conclusions to be drawn with other organisations.

6. Research Method

Due to the complex and subjective nature in assessing ones performance in the Armed Forces, a qualitative research design was used. Qualitative research in its very nature seeks:

“to describe, decode, translate and otherwise come to terms with the meaning, not the frequency, of certain more or less naturally occurring phenomena in the social world[allowing for] more depth and greater richness of context[ensuring that there is] the potential for new insights and perspectives is greater (Zawawi, 2007, p.3).”

Data collection was completed using a purposive sampling strategy that sought to utilise information-rich cases, in order to provide the greatest insight into the current PAS used by the British Army (Devers and Frankel, 2000). The study collated typical cases, deviant or extreme cases, and negative or disconfirming cases (Devers and Frankel, 2000). Primary data was collated through two methods: (1) one-to-one interviews with personnel who complete appraisals on a regular basis, as well as those who have worked at the Army Personnel Centre at Glasgow; (2) group discussions with employees who receive appraisals. The format for the interview can be found at Appendix 1.

Due to restrictions in time and resources, the sample size was centred on the Infantry Battle School, which is the centre of the British Army's Infantry command and leadership training establishment, housing approximately 400 military personnel. This allowed for a focused study that utilised various levels of experience of staff and students.

7. Resources

This research required limited additional resources, as it was purposefully centred and focused within the author's current place of employment. There were no restrictions in data access and equipment as current office space was utilised.

8. Research Contribution to Theory and Practice

No research has evaluated a PAS within an organisation during a significant period of change. This research project highlights that during an uncertain period the necessity to appraise the performance of its employees is even more vital. The British Army's current PAS was used as a model to conduct thorough investigative research and subsequent evaluation of this particular phenomenon. This allowed for an

appreciation to be gained for the PAS overall purpose and comprehensiveness to ensure that all staff, including the appraiser and appraisee, are as effective as possible.

9. Research Findings and Analysis

In total 45 people were interviewed, which consisted of a mix of experience ranging from 5 to 20 years in the British Army as appraisers and appraisees. Two people that were interviewed had previous employment or had spent some time at the Army Personnel Centre, which is responsible for promotion and army manning. The following is a précis of the various interviews and discussion groups that occurred.

The purpose of the PAS, used within the British Army, is assessed to act in a way to state how the appraisee has done and how they could do in the future. It should be compiled by using a series of formal and informal interviews, discussions and reports so that the appraiser can gain, at best, a full 360 degree awareness of their subject. However, it was agreed that this is largely down to the style, experience and competence of their reporting officer, which can lead to inconsistencies. The process to generate a full awareness of their subject is conducted informally and is not stipulated as part of the formal requirement to generate an appraisal. Duster off, Cunningham and MacGregor (2014) and Wilsted and Taylor (1978) argued that employees judge their own appraisal on the perspective of its moral justifiability, which in turn will affect their overall performance.

It was suggested that due to the very nature of having two primary purposes for the PAS, there cannot be a true assessment of a subject's performance. The conflict occurs when having a PAS that simultaneously assesses an individual's performance and their suitability for future roles and promotion within the same document. Therefore, due to an increasingly competitive promotional environment, one's performance appraisal can be diluted to fit a future role rather than appraising their current performance. This can be mitigated if the appraisers are accurate and honest, which will require the appropriate training for the appraiser and suitable knowledge for the appraisee. Levinson (2003, p.109) stipulated that superiors often find this aspect of an appraisal difficult as there is the belief that: "managers experience their appraisal of others as a hostile, aggressive act that unconsciously is felt to be hurting or destroying the other person. The appraisal situation, therefore, gives rise to powerful, paralyzing feelings of guilt that make it extremely difficult for most executives to be constructively critical of subordinates"

When this is coupled with the importance of generating an appraisal that is used simultaneously with analysing a subject's performance and potential for future roles, this phenomenon is further exacerbated.

If used properly the appraisal is useful in determining areas for training and development and has been used successfully as a legal tool in past cases. The PAS requires a subjective opinion and relies on appraisers to be competent and honest, whilst fully understanding its requirements. Levinson (2003) highlighted the importance of gaining an appropriate balance between objective and subjective material when formulating an appraisal. This is because, if the appraiser focuses solely on quantifiable measurements, the subtle elements of subject's role will be missed. The British Army's appraisal is purposefully broad, as it is required to cross different fields and roles within the Armed Forces. It is apparent that there is significant emphasis placed on the importance of appraising employees performance effectively, but there is limited training to ensure that the complete PAS is conducted comprehensively.

The PAS can be a useful tool to help motivate the appraisee, however, this largely depends on the subject and how it is delivered. When interviewing individuals who were solely the appraisee they were, on the whole, dissatisfied with the PAS and felt that it did not have a great effect on their performance. Iqbal's (2012, p.42) paper argued that discontent from subjects is primarily because of differences in "leniency/strictness bias, accuracy of judgment, structure and administrative practices." As a result of these disparities, Nickols (2007, p.13) argued that the PAS "devours staggering amounts of time and energy, depresses and de-motivates people, destroys trust and teamwork and [...] delivers little demonstrable value at great cost. [The PAS] when weighed, [is] found wanting in the balance."

The British Army's PAS aims to grade everyone against their peers in order to make a more informed decision about their suitability for future roles and promotion. This aspect can be counterintuitive and de-motivating especially when establishing someone's past performance and setting goals for the subsequent year. Levinson (2003) emphasised that in order to get the most out an employee, management must understand and appraise an individual's own objectives along with that of the organisation. The interests of both parties must be meshed together, which will ensure that "the energies of [the] employee and organization are pooled for mutual advantage (Levinson, 2003, p. 112). Levinson (2003, p.113) further stipulated that:

"The power of this force is reflected in the finding that the more a subordinate participates in the appraisal interview by presenting personal ideas and beliefs, the more likely he or she is to feel that a) the superior is helpful and constructive, b) some current job problems are being cleared up, and c) reasonable future goals are being set."

Rees and Eldridge's (2007) paper supported this phenomenon and found that both people and organisations needs and interests change over time, which requires holistic HR activities to appreciate the evolving employee aspirations.

10. Conclusion

This research has examined the phenomenon behind the PAS within an organisation that has undergone a large restructuring program. It has used the British Army as an example to draw qualitative conclusions from using a purposive research method. It has realised that employees judge their own appraisal on the perspective of its moral justifiability, which requires the appraiser to attain a full awareness of their subject. The PAS can be a useful motivational tool if delivered appropriately. However, by formally grading peer groups in order to determine applicants for future promotions, whilst incorporating the result within their performance appraisal, the outcome can be counterintuitive. It can be argued that the negative impact of conducting formal appraisals outweighs the benefits and consequently results in a more disgruntled workforce. An organisation must develop a system that meshes the interests of both their employees and their own objectives.

Within the context of the British Army, the appraisal has equal importance as an assessment on not just the current and past performance, but on suitability for promotion and future roles. It is believed that this forms a conflict of the two purposes and subsequently management is paralysed in their appraisal when they should constructively critique their employee's performance. This will require further quantitative and scientific research in order to study this in greater depth as no research up until this date has analysed this phenomenon.

11. Pre-word & Acknowledgements

The British Army has undergone a major restructuring programme in recent times, whilst trying to withdraw from a major theatre of conflict. Their employees, the soldiers, are expected to deliver in diverse roles and perform to a high standard. Their performance will have an impact on the lives of those around them, if not properly managed. A tool that is used is the performance appraisal, which formulises a soldier's past performance and their prospects for the future. The Performance Appraisal System (PAS), when used correctly, can have a positive impact on a soldier's motivation and provide a useful guidance tool for their future employability and development. This research project aims to understand the phenomenon surrounding the current PAS used within the Army and help draw conclusions that will lead to further quantifiable research.

This research project is produced as part of a Business Development Management module for the Swiss Management Centre, based in Zurich. The module forms part of an MBA. Special thanks must go to the professor in charge of this module, Dr Nickhil Agarwal, who has proved guidance and support throughout the module. Also, thank you to Philippa Denlegh-Maxwell, whose endless support and proof-reading ability has been essential.

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Appendix 1 – Interview Format

Introduction (to be used for both group and one-to-one interviews)

- Permission to audio-tape: May I record our interview to listen to it again later?
- There is no right or wrong answer; I want to understand your experiences.
- You can stop participating at any time if you feel uncomfortable.
- As you are talking, I will listen and probe when necessary. I may be quiet, please keep talking.
- Would you mind if I jot down a few notes while you talk?
- Please stop me and clarify any question if needed.

Research Question 1: What is the full purpose of the current PAS incorporated by the British Army and is this realized throughout?
How do you feel that...

- ...it is a true reflection of past performance and allows for one to establish a formalised set of objectives to be achieved for the subsequent year? (This probe to be asked to all, but the subsequent questions solely with one-to-one interviews)
- ...it is fully/over utilised in deciding who to promote and who to terminate?
 - Is this especially true within the redundancy tranches?
- ...the PAS is useful in determining areas for training and development?
- ...it is a comprehensive document for legal purposes?
- ...it is used to establish the successful criteria required for each role?

Research Question 2: Do you feel that the current PAS could be more comprehensive in achieving its aims?
Do you feel that...

- ...there could be other methods that could be incorporated to ensure that a true reflection of someone's performance is considered?
- ...how much of it is down to the personality of the appraiser?

Research Question 3: Please describe how you believe that the PAS is a useful motivation tool?

Research Question 4: Please describe how the current PAS affects an appraisee's performance?

Research Question 5: What other effects does the current PAS have on the appraiser, both positive and negative?

Appendix 2 – Timescale for Research

Ser	Event	Duration	Remarks
1	Submission of Research Proposal	Start	Estimated to have a return back within 1 week
2	Primary Research	1 week	One-to-one interviews and group discussions
3	Collation of data for analysis and discussion	1 week	
4	Final preparations prior to submission	1 week	