

Municipal sports officers' perceptions of performance appraisal and their relationship with satisfaction with the process

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Abstract

One of the human resources management functions is the appraisal of employee performance. Given the fact that employees are the most important source of capital advantage to an organisation, the overall aim of performance appraisal should be to instil a high performance culture in the organisation. Public organisations like municipalities have focused greatly on performance appraisal because it is critical to the improvement of employee performance and development. Improved employee performance could lead to effective delivery of sports services which appear to be a neglected service delivery area in many municipalities. Despite the perceived importance of performance appraisal in organisations, it has come under considerable scrutiny, criticism and debate recently resulting in extensive contention of its efficacy and usefulness. The purpose of the study was to investigate the relationship between municipal sport officers' perceptions of performance appraisal and their satisfaction with the appraisal process. Using a quantitative research approach, a three-section questionnaire was administered to a sample of 101 municipal sports officers in selected municipalities in the Gauteng province of South Africa. Descriptive analysis of the sample composition was undertaken and the Cronbach alpha reliability of the subscales was established. Correlation analysis was used to examine the relationship between satisfaction with the performance appraisal process and *personal benefits, performance appraisal criteria, organisational benefits, feedback* and *perceived fairness*. Regression analysis was undertaken to determine the strongest predictor of satisfaction with the performance appraisal process. It is evident from the findings of the study that municipal sports officers' satisfaction with the performance appraisal process at their respective organisations influences the extent to which organisational goals are achieved. Therefore the potential that performance appraisal has to develop and change the goals and strategies of an organisation into manageable factors that are measurable and attainable should be exploited.

Keywords: Performance appraisal, human resources management, feedback, organisational benefits, perceived fairness.

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Introduction

Market globalisation and increased competition have placed huge pressure on organisations to increase productivity and reduce costs (Lamb, 2009). The human resources at any organisation, viewed as the most precious resource (Surujlal, 2004), have the potential to alleviate this pressure. Human resources, however, need to be managed efficiently and effectively so that they are able to produce at the highest level. One of the human resources management functions is the appraisal of employee performance. Given the fact that employees are the most important source of capital advantage to an organisation (Baron & Armstrong, 2007), the overall aim of performance appraisal should be to instil a high performance culture in the organisation.

Over the decades researchers have provided various definitions of performance appraisal. Coens and Jenkins (2000) suggest that performance appraisal is a mandated process in which, for a specified period of time, all or a group of an employee's work behaviours or traits are individually rated, judged, or described by an appraiser and the results are kept by the organisation. Li (2009:428), on the other hand, describes performance appraisal as “the process that identifies, observes, measures and develops the performance of an individual of an organisation so as to attain the goals of an organisation”. Schuler (1983) describes performance appraisal as a formal system of measuring and evaluating an employee's job-related behaviours and outcomes to discover how the employee performs the job currently and how the employee can provide more effective performance in the future so that the employee, the organisation and society benefit. Chelladurai (1999) posits that an employee's domain of performance includes job specific tasks as well as non-job specific tasks. Job-specific tasks include written and oral communication, supervision and leadership, and management and administration whilst the non-job specific task performance includes effort, personal discipline, and involvement in and the facilitation of peer and workgroup tasks. This, therefore, implies that if performance appraisal is regarded as a holistic process, then both job specific tasks as well as non-job specific tasks need to be appraised during performance appraisal.

MacLean and Zakrajsek (1996) provide a different view of what should be appraised during performance appraisal.. The authors argued that jobs are created to fulfill specific purposes in the framework of organisational objectives. Therefore, the responsibilities associated with the job, which define the job description of the employee, should become the focus of performance appraisal. On the other hand, although job-specific performance appraisal is broadly recognized as an essential component for valid evaluation, Murphy and Cleveland (cited in MacLean & Zakrajsek, 1996) argued that, in addition to the job description, contextual factors of the environment ranging from the social

and legal system to the climate and culture within the organisation should also be considered.

While all the core components of a job needs to be included in the performance appraisal (Chelladurai, 1999), the key performance areas that are evaluated during performance appraisals should be specific in terms of the aspects related to work performance. This must be measurable in terms of quantity and quality, achievable within other work constraints, relevant to the aims and objectives of the organisation and time constrained (Cornelius, 2001).

Municipalities, like most similar organisations, employ a diverse workforce which includes municipal sports officers. Along with the diversity of employees come differences in the jobs of employees in the organisation. Municipal sports officers play an important role in that they are required to liaise with their management, communities, as well as external stakeholders which include sport organisations, federations and governing bodies of different sports. Thus the productivity and success of the municipality in delivering sport to its communities is dependent on the job performance of the sport officer. The job of a municipal sports officer encompasses both the job specific as well as the non-job specific aspects. With regard to the job specific tasks of municipal sports officers, they are required to plan their activities and tasks and communicate such to their subordinates both verbally and in writing. They are also expected to provide good leadership and supervision as well as be able to manage their own job schedules as well as that of subordinates.

Public organisations like municipalities have focused greatly on performance appraisal because it is critical to the improvement of employee performance and development. Improved employee performance could lead to effective delivery of sports services which appear to be a neglected service delivery area in many municipalities. In order to address this concern, municipalities should embrace delivery of sports services as an essential component of service delivery targets or agreement of the municipality.

Delivery of sports services to communities involves coordination of sports clubs, organisations and societies in various residential areas of the municipality. Coordination of these entities fall on the shoulders of municipal sports officers whose main task is to promote participation a variety of sports within their organisations and local communities that are within the jurisdiction of those particular municipalities (Mafini, Surujlal & Dhurup, 2011). This suggests that municipal sports officers are of strategic importance to any municipality and their performance needs to be managed properly by the organisation.

Functions of performance appraisal

The appraisal of employee performance is of utmost importance since it provides vital information which contributes to making major decisions in an organisation (Findlay, 2002). Mwita (2000) opines that many organisations place huge emphasis on personnel evaluation because of the direct link it has with successful organisations.

As a diagnostic tool for organisational problems as well as quality control (Barber & Eckrich, 1998), performance appraisal contributes to getting improved results in the organisation through an understanding of the framework within which performance in an organisation is managed (Cornelius, 2001).

While the success of a sport organisation is dependent on many factors, it is the personnel who guide, define and implement operations (Surujlal, 2004). Appraisal of their performance provides reliable information which help to maintain control of current operations and help guide future planning. In the context of this study it determines the extent to which the municipal sport officer contributes to the overall goals and objectives of the municipality.

Maclean (2001) and Swanepoel, Erasmus, Van wyk and Schenk (2003) posit that performance appraisal makes it possible to collect important information which assists the appraiser in giving feedback to employees so that they know where they stand in terms of their performance relative to what was expected of them. Through feedback received via the appraisal process, employees became aware of shortcomings or strengths in their performance (Hindo, 2010).

Performance appraisal plays a significant role in determining how employees should be compensated. It lays a solid foundation for payment of equitable salaries contingent to their performance. This obviates the practice of “one size fits all” according to which, in some instances, employees whose performance is below par are paid the same salary as those who are sterling performers. By means of a performance appraisal, the two types of employees are distinguished and rewarded accordingly. Incentives are offered to employees whose performance is considered satisfactory and none to those who fail to meet performance standards (Mathis & Jackson, 2000). More specifically, performance appraisal contributes to enhancing the effectiveness and efficiency of sport organisations by providing guidance in developing valid data for rewarding employees (Swanepoel et al., 2003).

Performance appraisal provides the basis for transfers, demotion and layoffs (Surujlal, 2004). It is also instrumental in identifying employees who are not performing according to the required standard and either removing them from

the organisation, disciplining them, providing training or providing a means of warning them about unsatisfactory performance (Slack, 1997). Conversely, employees whose performance meet the performance requirements are retained (Pettijohn, Parker, Pettijohn & Kent, 2001).

In addition to assisting the human resources manager to validate the recruitment and selection criteria used in the initial hiring process, performance appraisal also assists in identifying the type of training programs needed in the sport organisation (Surujlal 2004).

Performance appraisal generates written information required in a disciplinary process. Sometimes the outcomes of a disciplinary process can be so severe that it may lead to dismissal, hence the credibility of the process should be supported by documented proof. Performance appraisal is beneficial for the reason that it can be utilised to evaluate training programmes. Research (Sharma, Singh, Singh & Singh, 2012; Hunnes, Kvaløy & Mohn, 2012) confirms the view that employees who are subjected to performance appraisal stand a better chance of career advancement. Better career prospects are attributed to constructive feedback obtained from the performance appraisal process. Performance appraisal data could be utilised by many managers to suggest a career path for employees. The employees in turn could realise the genuine interest that managers have on them, thereby strengthening manager-subordinate relations (Jackson & Schuler, 2000). It also provides valuable assistance with regard to supervising and developing staff (Cornelius, 2001), in order for them to strive towards achieving their potential.

Performance appraisal potentially leads to better information exchange, more open communication between employee and manager; assists greatly in clarifying organisational, managerial and employee expectations as well as strengthens regarding manager/employee relations (Cornelius, 2001). Through this strengthened relationship commitment to the organisation is developed.

Limitations of performance appraisal

Many authors (e.g. Swanepoel et al., 2003; MacLean, 2001, Ferris, Hochwarter, Buckley, Harrell-Cook & Frink, 2009) believe that performance appraisal is both difficult and controversial. Therefore appraisers should have an understanding that while there may be one instrument used by an organisation, they may be prone to errors that may occur during performance appraisal process. They need to be cautious about possible errors in the performance appraisal process that may be distributional in nature. An example of this is being too lenient or strict, or concentrating every performance score on the central range, or basing the evaluation of an employee in relation to the previous employee evaluated instead of in comparison with the standards of the job (Chelladurai, 1999).

MacLean (2001) warns against attributing failure to the employee and success to the situation. Appraisers should also guard against ignoring individual differences and generalising findings across all groups of employees. Some of the preconceived notions regarding performance appraisal are associated with age, ethnicity, gender, physical appearance, attitudes and values, in-group/out-group, personal likes/dislikes, politics, impression management, and undeserved past reputation. Swan (1991) is of the opinion that some of the problems that may emerge if the performance appraisal process is flawed are: inadequately defined performance standards and criteria, misunderstanding about performance standards and criteria, lack of proper performance appraisal documentation and appraisers relying on their instincts about an employee.

Problem statement

Performance appraisal is a critical human resources management function which is utilised widely in most organisations. It is believed that performance appraisal, if effectively designed and implemented, has the potential to provide an organisation with an array of benefits (Walsh, 2003).

Despite the perceived importance of performance appraisal in organisations, it has come under considerable scrutiny, criticism and debate recently resulting in considerable contention of its efficacy and usefulness. MacLean (2001) posits that while the success of a sport organisation is dependent on many factors, it is the employees who guide and implement operations in an organisation. There is a vast difference in the job requirements of employees in the public sector and in the private sector (Perry & Wise, 1990); therefore the way in which they are appraised should be different. Municipalities are consumer-oriented organisations, therefore it is important that the work performance of their employees is appraised properly.

Although performance appraisal has been researched extensively in many contexts, there is a paucity of research which specifically examines the factors influencing the perceptions of performance appraisal of municipal sports officers in a South African context and the relationship with satisfaction of the appraisal process. The lack of research presented the major reason for conducting this study. The purpose of the study was, therefore, to investigate municipal sport officers' perceptions of performance appraisal and their relationship with satisfaction with the appraisal process.

Methodology

Research approach

This study adopted a quantitative approach. This approach was utilised because the main purpose of the study was to objectively measure the perceptions of

municipal sports officers of the performance appraisal process at their organisations. Since the area of study specifically focussing on municipal sport officers within the South African context is under-researched, the design can be viewed as exploratory.

Sample

The sample in the study comprised municipal sport officers from selected municipalities in the Gauteng province of South Africa. The criteria used to select the respondents were as follows: a) their performance was appraised during the past twelve months, and b) they were employed by their respective organisations for a period of at least two years. Snowball sampling was used to recruit potential respondents. The principal researcher requested the services of an experienced municipal sports officer who identified key personnel at different municipalities to assist in the administration of the questionnaires. Data were collected over a six-week period. One hundred and one (n=101) questionnaires of which four were not usable were returned. The low number of respondents may be attributed to the low number of municipal sports officers employed by the municipalities.

Instrumentation and procedures for data collection

A three-section questionnaire was developed based on an extensive literature review on performance appraisal. Section A of the questionnaire requested respondents to provide demographic information relating to them. Section B comprised questions on the perceptions of municipal sports officers regarding performance appraisal at their organisations. In this section the following sub scales were included: *personal benefits*, *performance appraisal criteria*, *organisational benefits*, *feedback* and *perceived fairness*. The items in this section were scored on a 5-point Likert scale which was anchored at 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Section C requested information regarding respondents' satisfaction with the performance appraisal process. The items in this section were also scored on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Two experienced researchers in human resources management reviewed the instrument for its content validity. In order to eliminate any ambiguity and to ascertain the time for its completion, the questionnaire was pre-tested with six sports officers who were in close proximity to the principal researcher. Based on the feedback received from the pre-test, revisions were made to the questionnaire.

Ethical considerations

In administering the questionnaire, various ethical considerations were adhered to. An accompanying letter clearly outlining the purpose of the study was attached to the questionnaire. Informed consent to participate in the study was

received from all respondents before they were given the questionnaire. The participants' right to anonymity, confidentiality, privacy or non-participation, protection from discomfort, harm and victimisation were respected.

Data analysis

The data were analysed in the following ways: a descriptive analysis of the sample composition was undertaken and the Cronbach alpha reliability of the subscales in Section B and Section C was established. Correlation analysis was used to examine the relationship between satisfaction with the performance appraisal process and the five factors. Furthermore, regression analysis of the five factors against satisfaction with the performance appraisal process was undertaken. The Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS – version 20) was used to analyse the data.

Results

Demographics

The demographic profile of the sample is provided in Table 1 which illustrates that the units of analysis in this study are 97 sports officers, the majority of whom are female respondents (n=55).

Table 1: Demographic profile of respondents (n=97)

Gender	Male	39
	Female	55
	Missing	3
Work experience	<2 years	38
	2-5 years	31
	6-9 years	11
	>9 years	13
	Missing	4
Type of employment	Permanent	55
	Contract	22
	Part-time	17
	Missing	3
Qualification	Grade 12	59
	Certificate	12
	Diploma	10
	Degree	3
	Higher degree	2
	Other	3
Age group (in years)	Missing	8
	18-25	24
	26-35	38
	36-45	18
	46-55	11
	>56	6
	Missing	6

Three respondents did not indicate their gender. Most respondents (n=55) had more than two years of experience in their current position, and were permanent employees (n=55). Most respondents were in possession of a Grade 12 certificate (n=59) and were between the ages of 18-35 years (n=62).

Perceptions of performance appraisal subscales

The subscales, operational descriptions and Cronbach alpha reliabilities of the subscales in Section B of the questionnaire are provided in Table 2.

Table 2: Subscales, operational definitions and Cronbach alpha reliabilities

Subscale	Operational description	Cronbach alpha
Personal benefits	“positive changes in job-related behaviour and attitude; an awareness of strengths and weaknesses relating to the job; promotions and incentives”	0.867
Performance appraisal criteria	“aspects of the job which are evaluated during performance appraisal”	0.621
Organisational benefits	“concerned with the positive contribution in terms of information regarding employee utilisation, job analysis, compensation and identifying areas for improvement; overall organisational performance”	0.768
Feedback	“concerned with the way feedback was provided to municipal sport officers, the type of feedback and the timeliness of the feedback”	0.672
Perceived fairness	“the extent to which employees trust the performance appraisal instrument and perceive its application as fair, resulting in equitable rewards; performance appraisal data is objective”	0.682

Correlations

Choudhury (2009) suggested that the strength of the relationship between variables can be interpreted as follows: \pm (0.5 to 1.0) = strong; \pm (0.3 to 0.5) = moderate; \pm (0.1 to 0.3) = weak; \pm (0.0 to 0.1) = very weak or no relationship. An examination of the correlation matrix illustrated in Table 3 reveals that there is a strong relationship between *personal benefits* and *performance appraisal criteria* ($r=.584$), *organisational benefits* ($r=.666$) and *feedback* ($r=.505$) and a moderate relationship with *perceived fairness* ($r=.468$) and *satisfaction with the performance appraisal process* ($r=.305$). In support of these findings, Sahoo and Mishra (2012) found that the use of appropriate performance appraisal criteria is beneficial to employees in the sense that they would receive promotions and incentives for meeting the performance criteria. This may increase their job satisfaction thereby improving commitment to their organisations.

Table 3: Correlation analysis

	Personal benefits	Performance appraisal criteria	Organisational benefits	Feedback	Perceived fairness	Satisfaction with the process
Personal benefits	1.000	.584**	.666**	.505**	.468**	.305**
Performance appraisal criteria	.584**	1.000	.737**	.582**	.529**	.471**
Organisational benefits	.666**	.737**	1.000	.582**	.444**	.506**
Feedback	.505**	.582**	.582**	1.000	.504**	.165
Perceived fairness	.468**	.529**	.444**	.504**	1.000	.360**
Satisfaction with the process	.305**	.471**	.506**	.165	.360**	1.000

Correlation significant at $p < 0.01$ **

The provision of feedback to employees after a performance appraisal has been confirmed by Brown, Hyatt and Benson (2010) to improve their performance, culminating in improved organisational performance in the form of increased profitability or productivity. If employees perceive the implementation of the performance appraisal as fair they are likely to be satisfied with it, buy-into the process and take ownership of it (Kang & Fredin, 2012).

It is also evident from Table 3 that a strong relationship exists between *performance appraisal criteria* and *organisational benefits* ($r=.737$), *feedback* ($r=.582$) and *perceived fairness* ($r=.529$); and a moderate relationship with *satisfaction with the performance appraisal process* ($r=.471$). Organisations in which managers utilise appropriate performance criteria are prone to sustained attainment of their objectives. This stems from the fact that performance appraisal criteria are aligned to the overall organisational objectives. Where performance appraisal criteria have been identified, employees receive feedback about their progress towards meeting the performance appraisal criteria (Pettijohn et al., 2001). Moreover, the identification of performance appraisal criteria before the commencement of the performance appraisal process has the spinoff of inducing employees with a positive attitude towards the process and a perception of a fair performance review process. The formulation of performance appraisal criteria improves employee reception of the performance appraisal process because they know upfront what their performance is measured against and are therefore satisfied with the performance appraisal process (Abrahams, Karns, Shaw & Mena, 2001).

The relationship between *organisational benefits* and *feedback* ($r=.582$) and *satisfaction with the performance appraisal process* ($r=.506$) was strong while it was moderate with *perceived fairness* ($r=.444$). Performance appraisal feedback provided to employees clearly identifies areas of good performance as well as those areas that are in need of improvement. Fryer, Antony and

Ogden (2009) argue that the provision of positive or negative feedback ensures improved performance in case of the former and development of deficiencies for the latter. Improved employee performance leads to improved organisational performance in the form of improved efficiency, effectiveness and profitability for the whole organisation (Verbeeten, 2008). These performance appraisal-related organisational benefits have the potential of improving wages or salaries of employees, let alone the probability of their sustained employment in such organisations. Improved salaries or wages and positive attitude changes towards work, which results from the performance appraisal process, instill satisfaction in regard to the performance appraisal process in employees (Robbins, Judge, Odendaal & Roodt, 2009).

Table 3 reveals that the relationship between *feedback* and *perceived fairness* ($r=.504$) is strong while the relationship between *feedback* and *satisfaction with the performance appraisal process* ($r=.165$) is weak. Employees receiving regular feedback about their performance consider the performance appraisal process used in gathering performance appraisal information as fair opposed to when feedback is received sporadically (Oddou & Mendenhall, 2000). On the other hand, the correlation between feedback and employees' satisfaction with the performance appraisal process being low may be as a result of the manner in which it is provided. Appraisers may happen to concentrate only on the negative aspects of employee performance without highlighting stronger side of employees' performance, thereby running the risk of subjectivity in their feedback report. The lack of objectivity of performance scores has the potential of creating acrimonious personal relations with the appraisers (Gregurus, Ford & Brutus, 2003).

Also the relationship between *perceived fairness* and *satisfaction with the performance appraisal process* ($r=.165$) is moderate. The moderate correlation between *perceived fairness* and *satisfaction with the performance appraisal process* could be attributed to the lack of trust in the manner in which the performance appraisal instrument is administered (Rowland & Hall, 2012). Earlier, it was indicated that employees are satisfied with the performance appraisal process because the performance appraisal criteria are clearly spelt out. The problem appears to lie in the manner of utilisation of and not in the performance appraisal content of the instrument. Several reasons, for example biasness, strictness, central tendency, or sometimes leniency of appraisers in allocating appraisal scores may be attributed to this situation (Simmons, 2002).

Regression

In Table 4 the regression analysis revealed that the five performance appraisal sub-scales (adjusted $R^2 = 0.320$) explain approximately 32% of the variance in overall satisfaction with the performance appraisal process of municipal sport officers. Only *organisational benefits* ($p=0.001$) was statistically significant at $p<0.05$.

Table 4: Regression analysis

Satisfaction with the performance appraisal process			
Dependent variable			
Variable to enter	Beta	T	Sig
Independent variable			
Personal benefits	-.102	-.864	.199
Performance appraisal criteria	.241	1.787	.390
Organisational benefits	.481	.3.413	.001
Feedback	-.319	-2.834	.006
Perceived fairness	.228	2.165	.033

R= 0.596 R²= 0.355 R²=0.320 (adjusted)

A plausible reason for this is that managers might be happy with the benefits accruing from the performance appraisal process because its application is directly related to enhanced efficiency, effectiveness or profitability. In other words, the improved organisational performance is contingent on the application of the performance appraisal process, hence the satisfaction with the process. Managers are likely to be happy with the performance appraisal system if its concomitant results are beneficial to the organisation (Verbeeten, 2008). *Performance appraisal criteria* ($\beta=0.241$), *organisational benefits* ($\beta=0.481$) and *perceived fairness* ($\beta=0.228$) contributed positively towards overall satisfaction with the performance appraisal process of municipal sport officers. The findings of Thurston and McNall (2010) support the notion that fairness in the performance appraisal process increases satisfaction with the process. Similarly Brown and Benson (2005) found that employees who perceived the appraisal as unfair or biased often distrust the manager, organization, and the system. This distrust contributed to lower job satisfaction, lower motivation and lack of loyalty. Rudman (2003) emphasised that the criteria used to appraise performance should be clear and meaningful. If these criteria are met then employees would be more positively inclined to the appraisal process.

It is, however, interesting to note that *personal benefits* ($\beta = -0.102$), $p > 0.05$) and *feedback* ($\beta = -0.319$), $p > 0.05$) showed negative relationship with overall satisfaction with the performance appraisal process. A plausible reason for this may be that the feedback that was received was either unclear or not meaningful. This has a direct link with how beneficial employees perceive the feedback to be. If employees do not find the feedback to be meaningful, it is likely that they will not experience satisfaction with the personal benefits associated with the appraisal process. Belschak and Den Hartog (2009) found that employees' reaction to feedback influenced their attitude to the feedback thereby contributing to the level of satisfaction experienced with the appraisal process.

Limitations and implications for further research

While the study constitutes an important source of knowledge and information on performance appraisal pertaining to municipal sports officers, it should be viewed in the light of its limitations. An important limitation of this study was that the sample consisted of respondents from only one geographical location. Another limitation was the reliance on data collected from self-reported questionnaires. One of the shortcomings of using self-reported questionnaires is that it is difficult to control respondent behaviour and responses. Hence, it provides little opportunity to clarify uncertainties which may result in the validity of the data being compromised. The generalisation of the findings should thus be approached with caution.

Notwithstanding the limitations, the study has implications for further research. The findings of this study can be further refined by examining the relationship between the perceptions of performance appraisal and demographic factors. It would also be interesting to replicate the study in other geographical locations and compare the findings.

Conclusion

The link between municipal sports officers and development of sport in communities is vital and needs to be strengthened and sustained. It is evident from the findings of the study that municipal sports officers' satisfaction with the performance appraisal process at their respective organisations influences the extent to which organisational goals are achieved. Therefore the potential that performance appraisal has to develop and change the goals and strategies of an organisation into manageable factors, which are measurable and attainable, should be exploited.

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