

Individual Performance Management: A Review of Current Practices

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Abstract

This paper provides a review of current practice in relation to individual performance management systems and process within the traditional business environment. There is a consensus that the role of the individual is central to the overall performance of any organization and how individual performances are managed and evaluated can have significant impacts on overall organizational success. Many organizations employ the traditional performance appraisal in order to monitor and assess individual employee performances. However, new approaches, such as 360-degree feedback have also become commonplace within the business environment. An analysis of each approach including benefits and challenges associated with each process is presented within this paper.

Keywords

Performance appraisal, 360-degree feedback, individual employee, multi-rater

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Introduction

As the individual employee contributes to improving the performance of the organization (Van Emmerik, 2008), it is essential that an individual performance management system is in place that helps them understand their role in achieving strategic objectives. McCarthy and Garavan (2001) suggest employees must receive constant support and feedback on their own performance and have opportunities to gain more expertise in their roles through learning and development programs. They add that performance management can only be successful if each section manager truly understands how to motivate and provide adequate learning and development resources; so that each

employee or section can be sufficiently measured by the success of their direct reports, not simply by business results. The setting that surrounds behavior, for example what people say and do that is praised or criticized over time can also help in supporting patterns of success. The level of success an organization experiences in applying the elements of performance management originates in the capability of its staff in serving stakeholder needs, meeting objectives, and creating a culture where the focus is aimed at building long lasting habits of success (McCarthy and Garavan, 2001).

The monitoring of overall organizational performance allows for the effective delivery of operational and strategic goals.

Previous research has shown a distinct correlation with applying performance management models or systems and enhanced organizational results (Kennerly and Neely, 2003; McNamara and Mong, 2005). Employee involvement is a critical component of any successful performance management system. The individual employee must play a prominent role in the design phase of any performance management system, as they are most aware of what measures must be taken in order to ensure the alignment of the system with the organization's strategic goals (Greasley, Bryman, Dainty, Price, Soetanto, and King, 2005; De Jong and DenHartog, 2007). Greasley et al. (2005) add that empowerment of individuals must not be limited to senior management or individual departments, but be extended to every single employee in the organization. Each individual or team must contribute and in return own the performance management system themselves.

Van Emmerik (2008) believes a critical component of successful performance management implementation is that performers gain excellence in their own performance. This is achieved by developing strong high performance habits that can be applied across similar or different areas for effective problem solving and work habits. Regardless of the task, the goal at the individual level is to produce work that is of a high standard and to establish a real sense of pride in the work that they do (Chauvel and Despres, 2002). An integral component of adopting performance management practices within an organization is to insure that these methods are successful in motivating the individual employee in a number of areas, including improving employee engagement as they are required to see how their contribution directly affects the organization's high level goals (McBain,

2007). Furthermore, it is imperative that each individual's job description is intrinsically linked to strategic objectives in order to facilitate this situation. It is clear that organizational performance is directly associated with performances at the individual level, and therefore must be managed effectively. As a consequence, it is necessary to examine how organizations manage individual performances and to establish a 'best practice' approach to this issue that can be adopted by the business sector.

This paper explores the various techniques that organizations are employing in order to monitor and assess the performance of individual employees. The traditional performance appraisal is analyzed for the benefits it serves to organizations along with challenges that have become synonymous with this process. Following this, a comparison is provided with 360-degree feedback which is seen as a relatively new yet positive development within the field of individual performance management practices.

The Performance Appraisal

Traditionally, the performance appraisal has been widely used as a method of evaluating employee performance, setting goals for future performances and identifying areas of professional development required by the individual (DeNisi and Pritchard, 2006; Manasa and Reddy, 2009). Typically, a formal appraisal process will be conducted for an employee at a minimum of twice per year. DeNisi and Pritchard (2006) state:

“The goal of the performance management process is performance improvement, initially at the level of the individual employee, and ultimately at the level of the organization. The ultimate goal of performance appraisal should be to provide

information that will best enable managers to improve employee performance. Thus, ideally, the performance appraisal provides information to help managers manage in such a way that employee [and organizational] performance improves” (P.255).

Many traditional business organizations also use the performance appraisal as a means of assessing employee’s eligibility for performance based pay and possible promotion opportunities (Cleveland, Murphy, and Williams, 1989; Landy and Farr, 1980). Manasa and Reddy (2009) suggest that the goal of any performance management system is to ensure alignment and effective management of all organizational resources in order to facilitate optimal performance. They add that the manner in which performance is managed within organizations is a key indicator of overall success or failure. As the individual is clearly an integral resource impacting upon organizational performance, it is therefore essential that performance appraisal processes are adequate and create value within the broader performance management system (Muczyk and Gable, 1987). There are a number of benefits associated with the effective use of performance appraisals; most notably improved communication between management and employees. Conversely, challenges such as employee dissatisfaction with the process and potential legal issues if implemented incorrectly have also been highlighted more recently within the literature (Schraeder, Becton and Portis, 2007; Manasa and Reddy, 2009). An additional challenge in relation to the performance appraisal process is that a system which is deemed to be effective within one country or culture may not be as appropriate in another. Given the globalization and multinational operations associated with

many modern organizations, this has also been noted as a challenge associated with performance appraisals (Hofstede, 2001). Furthermore, although academic research relating to performance appraisals is well established, DeNisi and Pritchard (2006) argue that there is often disconnect between this research and actual practice. They suggest that “one possible explanation is that academic research has provided answers, but that practitioners are simply not aware of the relevant research findings” (p. 254). This situation has been noted as a problematic area within management research in general (Rynes, Brown, and Colbert, 2002), and it can be assumed that it is affecting the area of performance appraisals also.

The frequency of which performance appraisals should be conducted is a source of constant debate within both research and practice. Many organizations simply conduct performance appraisals on an annual basis; however, Schraeder et al. (2007) argue that conducting performance appraisals on a more regular basis (quarterly) can yield positive implications both for the employee and the organization. Furthermore, Sudarsan (2009) suggests more frequent appraisals result in reducing the extent of unexpected or surprising feedback on the part of the employee at year end reviews. A logical argument to the frequency of performance appraisals would suggest that the nature and role of the employee’s position is a determining factor in this decision. For instance, annual performance appraisals may be suitable for employees who are involved in the manufacturing industry whose main objective may be performance maintenance. For employees in other industries, quarterly performance appraisals maybe more appropriate due to the various objectives and timeframes in which they must achieve or make progress towards particular goals.

Benefits of Performance Appraisals

There are a number of potential benefits that organizations avail of as a direct result of implementing effective performance appraisal processes. The general consensus in the literature is that performance appraisals are an important mechanism involved in performance management within all types of organizations and have the potential to increase an organization's effectiveness (Pettijohn, Parker, Pettijohn and Kent, 2001; Spinks, Wells, Meche, 1999). At a fundamental level, if performance appraisals are conducted within organizations, individuals will receive feedback on their performance and have the opportunity to become more productive based upon that constructive feedback (Schraeder et al., 2007).

However, there are also a number of other benefits that are associated within the implementation of this management initiative:

1. **Improved Communication:** the issue of poor communication has been identified as one of the major concerns within the management literature (Schraeder et al., 2007; Spinks, Wells and Meche, 1999). As performance appraisals involve direct discussion, feedback and an opportunity to comment on issues with management, they contribute positively to removing concerns about uncertainty amongst employees. Furthermore, Schraeder et al. (2007) claim feedback from management relating to individual employee performance is of crucial importance in guiding individual performances.
2. **The establishment of trust between employees and their managers:** developing mutual trust between employees and management has been noted as an important factor in assisting individual performance within an organization (Kanfer and Ackerman, 1989). Schraeder et al. (2007) add that distrust between employees and management can negatively impact upon performance and causes a lack of engagement on the part of the employee with organizational objectives. Mayer and Gavin's (2005) article discussing the issue of "trust" within organizations, claims effective performance appraisals can contribute to increased trust within the organization and therefore impact positively upon individual performance.
3. **Linking individual performance to strategy: best practice in terms of organizational management supported by literature** (Schraeder et al., 2007) suggests that individual employee roles and responsibilities should be intrinsically linked to overall organizational objectives. This allows both the individual and management to see exactly how the employee contributes to the organization and how their performance can directly impact upon strategic imperatives. Performance appraisals create an ideal situation for both employees and management to discuss individual roles and responsibilities, set specific future performance criteria and provide opportunity to establish a "line of sight" between individual performance and organizational goals.
4. **Identification of training and professional development needs:** as individual performance is clearly a central factor in determining organizational performance, it is important that employees are given access to training and professional

development opportunities in order to better serve the organization. In order for the performance appraisal process to be complete, the individual must be presented with opportunities to address areas of required development identified within the appraisal itself. In addition, using performance appraisals to identify the development needs of new employees in particular has been shown to be most effective (Broady-Preston and Steel 2002).

5. Finally, the performance appraisal process is an instrumental tool in facilitating performance improvement, which is the ultimate goal of any performance management practice either at individual or organizational levels. In support of this, Schraeder et al. (2007) claim there is a general consensus in the literature that effective human resource practices such as performance appraisals are positively related to individual and organizational performance improvement.

Challenges of Performance Appraisals

Although, as argued above there are clear positive implications for organizations that are successful in implementing an effective performance appraisal system; the practice is also fraught with a number of challenges which must be acknowledged in order to ensure the process is not counterproductive. For instance, in terms of linking strategy to individual employee performances, it has been noted that this can be a difficult task to undertake particularly in large organizations with high volumes of employees (Twomey and Harris, 2000). Ultimately, problematic issues relating to performance appraisals arise as a result of two main factors: (a) the

performance appraisal process is not being implemented correctly, or (b) the process is not suitable to the manner in which the organization operates (Schraeder et al., 2007). The challenges that arise from these issues are:

1. Advocates (both practitioners and academics) of Total Quality Management (TQM) claim that performance appraisals are unnecessary in most organizations and that TQM will ensure a high level of performance within all aspects of the organization (Soltani, 2005). However, it is difficult to justify this argument in terms of many organizations, as TQM has mainly been applied within the manufacturing industry which a significant amount of organizations are clearly not involved in.
2. It has been noted that individual employees often have negative perceptions about the performance appraisal process. The evaluation and critique of an individual's performance can cause stress and discomfort (Spinks et al., 1999) which may ultimately lead to a short or long term drop in performance. In addition, the anticipation of a performance appraisal meeting may cause tension between supervisors and subordinates.
3. The rating system used to evaluate employee performance must be appropriate and applied to all employees of a similar level within the organization. The appraiser must be completely subjective in assessing the individual's performance otherwise the performance appraisal process will serve little benefit to the organization (Schraeder et al., 2007). Furthermore, the appraiser must not provide skewed results to management and the employee about

their performance in order to please employees and avoid conflict.

4. If the performance appraisal process is not conducted appropriately and professionally, the organization may be subject to legal issues that could arise as a result. Although not originally designed for this purpose, many organizations use the performance appraisal process as a tool to help in promotion decisions and disciplinary actions (Spinks et al., 1999). Therefore, if the process is implemented incorrectly, the organization may be left open to legal action.
5. For organizations that use a performance-based pay scheme, the performance appraisal is a significant factor in determining how much of the bonus an employee is entitled to. This further illustrates why the process must be implemented appropriately as if it is not, the benefits of other initiatives such as performance-based pay become completely undermined.

In addition to the various challenges set out above, research has suggested that individuals within organizations who operate a performance appraisal system are often not satisfied with the process (Sudarsan, 2009). This dissatisfaction generally relates to three major areas within the appraisal process: the subjectivity of the appraiser; the level of supplied feedback; and the frequency of the reviews, with employees suggesting that more regular reviews would be beneficial (Sudarsan, 2009).

Although a central factor in assessing individual employee performance, traditional performance appraisals (a single rater) have become synonymous with a number of defects even when implemented

correctly within organizations. A major theme within the literature relates to the negative associations around the performance appraisal interview; with both the employee and interviewee viewing this process as a stressful event and a chore that must be carried out to satisfy senior management. Furthermore, Folger and Cropanzano (1998) claim that managers are not good at supplying and dealing with negative feedback in relation to the performance appraisal interview and as a consequence, the results of the appraisal interview can often be inflated. If this is indeed the case as Folger and Cropanzano (1998) would suggest, then any performance management system operating at the individual level will be undermined and will ultimately create a negative impact upon organizational-wide performance. Additionally, as a result of inflated appraisals from their line manager, employee's expectations of pay and promotion may not be congruent with their actual performance and position within the organization. Finally, a major area of concern in relation to the performance appraisal of managers/department heads as outlined by Lepsinger and Lucia (1997) is that these individuals' performances may be judged on the efficiency/productivity of their department as opposed to their leadership skills and other behaviours that actually constitute individual performance. Due to these difficulties associated with the traditional performance appraisal process it is clear that a new method is required to ensure individual performances are being managed and assessed appropriately. In response to this growing concern over the potential defects within the performance appraisal process, some organizations have successfully re-developed the process which eliminates issues of appraiser bias and provides robust feedback to

the individual (and the organization) on various aspects of their job performance - this process has been labelled 360-degree feedback.

360-Degree Feedback

360-degree feedback is a performance appraisal process that takes the opinions and feedback of various groups and individuals into account when determining the overall performance of an individual employee. This can be contrasted with more traditional performance appraisal approaches which simply rely on a line manager's discretion in determining employee performance. This process has typically been utilised for managerial positions within organizations due to the complexities involved in carrying out the process for an organization that may employ a vast number of individuals. A unique aspect of the 360-degree process is that the employee also carries out a self-assessment of their performance which can be compared and contrasted to the views of the other "raters" (McCarthy and Garavan, 2001) involved in the process.

McCarthy and Garavan (2001) claim that a structured evaluation report is sought from various internal and external stakeholders of the organization who can comment on the performance of the individual being appraised. The same structured evaluation is also sent to the employee for the purposes of self-evaluation. Lepsinger and Lucia (1997) suggest that the process involves a collection of perceptions about the individual in terms of their performance from a number of suitable "rating" sources. The authors go on to claim that the purpose of the 360-degree feedback process is to show management and the individual exactly how their behaviour (performance) impacts upon other organizational members and the organization's objectives.

360-degree feedback has been used under a number of different terms within both the literature and in practice. All of the terms refer to a number of individuals or groups contributing to the feedback and appraisal of the individual employee. They include: stakeholder feedback; group performance appraisal; full-circle assessment; and

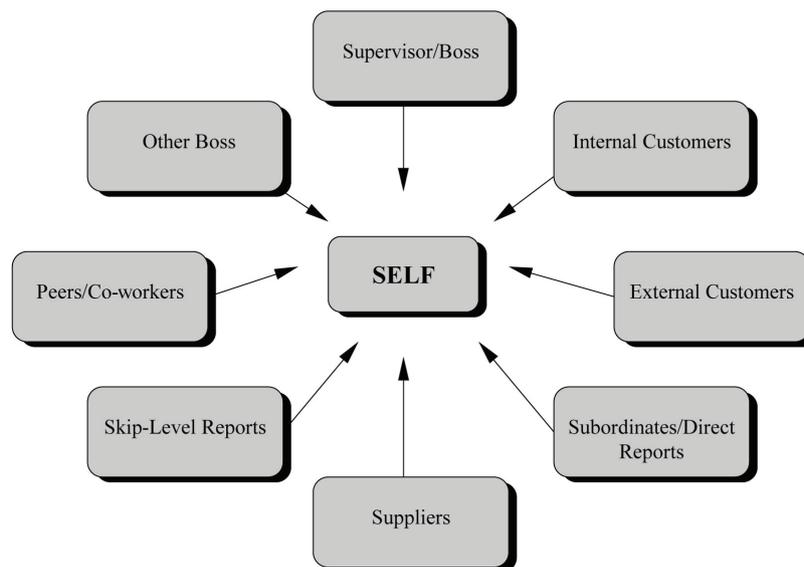


Figure 1. Potential raters in 360-Degree feedback (Adapted from McCarthy and Garavan, 2001)

multi-rater feedback. For the purposes of this review, 360-degree feedback is defined as an appraisal process involving a number of different sources as opposed to traditional performance appraisals undertaken by a single 'rater'. Figure 3 below, adapted from McCarthy and Garavan's (2001) study shows the various potential raters within a 360-degree feedback performance assessment. Although external groups and individuals add greater depth to the appraisal process, the most common raters within the 360-degree feedback process are the line manager; subordinates; peers; and self.

360-Degree Feedback vs. Traditional Performance Appraisal

When employing a 360-degree feedback approach, the multi-rater feedback is anonymous therefore removing the potential for over inflated results associated with providing negative feedback to the

employee as in the traditional approach. In addition, the stress/confrontational aspects of the appraisal are also removed as line managers are not required to carry out an in-depth interview with the employee. A further barrier to conducting effective appraisals as noted by Longenecker (1997) is the lack of information available to the appraiser to adequately assess the true performance of the employee. As 360-degree feedback provides opinion from a number of different sources, greater information and a more complete view of the employee's true performance can be presented. It is important to note that identification of training and development needs is still possible and perhaps more effective within 360-degree feedback, as this has been identified as one of the core necessities within any individual performance management system (DeNisi and Pritchard, 2006; Van Emmerick, 2008).

Table 1. Traditional Performance Appraisals vs. 360-degree feedback

Criteria	Traditional Performance Appraisals	360-Degree Feedback
Why?	To provide an evaluation on past performances from a single source.	To provide an evaluation and feedback on behaviour and development needs from multiple sources.
Raters	Line Manager.	Peers, subordinates, self, line manager, external individuals and groups.
Feedback	The line manager cannot have anonymity.	The multiple sources of feedback are able to remain anonymous.
Assessment	Both quantitative and qualitative methods employed.	Generally only quantitative methods employed.
Outcomes	Salary, promotion, transfer, demotion, training and development.	A strong focus on training and development in order to improve future performance. Can also be linked to compensation.
Frequency	Annual event.	Continuous, not limited to specific time frames.
Applicability	All employees.	All employees (unless staff numbers too vast).

There are a number of significant differences between a traditional performance appraisal approach (single rater) and a more modern 360-degree feedback approach (multi-rater). Traditional approaches are largely focussed on providing an evaluation of the employee's performance and are generally linked with pay and promotion prospects (London and Beatty, 1993). Although this is not necessarily a detrimental technique, performance improvement and development are often understated and there is a large focus on past performance as opposed to creating a situation for improved future employee performance. As a contrast, and in line with 'forward looking' principles of performance management, 360-degree feedback places more emphasis on employee improvement and development by supplying the individual with robust feedback in relation to their behaviours and actions within the workplace. It is clear that the most obvious difference between the two approaches lies in multi-rater feedback as opposed to a single rater appraisal and as such 360-degree feedback takes the complexities of working in a modern organization into account. Furthermore, the various individuals and groups that the employee interacts with are clearly a more appropriate source of feedback rather than a sole line manager who the individual may not necessarily interact with on a regular basis (McCarthy and Garavan, 2001).

Benefits of 360-Degree Feedback

360-degree feedback essentially encompasses all of the same benefits as traditional performance appraisals but also adds a number of 'unique' benefits. The sole reliance on one individual to assess an employee's performance as in traditional appraisals is widely considered

a flawed process and the multi-rater feedback of the 360-degree approach is now being regarded as best practice within the traditional business environment (Maylett, 2009). Colleagues and peers of the individual along with the line manager have the ability to provide a more comprehensive outlook of the employee's performance as opposed to single-rater feedback. This type of appraisal is especially relevant within organizations where the roles and responsibilities of individuals can vary greatly and the line manager may not have the opportunity to observe all areas of the individual's performance (Maylett, 2009).

In addition to above, there are also a number of associated benefits with the successful implementation of a 360-degree feedback approach:

1. The process can address a number of performance dimensions that may not have previously been addressed under traditional performance appraisals or that have been neglected by the organization. Furthermore, by collecting feedback from a number of raters, sources of conflict may be uncovered or resolved, in turn leading to a more effective workforce. Also, through seeking feedback from a number of sources, management are demonstrating to staff that they value their opinions within the organization (London and Beatty, 1993).
2. Garavan, Morley and Flynn (1997) suggest that 360-degree feedback facilitates increased employee involvement within the organization and improved workforce relationships. In terms of benefits for the individual, Garavan et al. (1997) claim the feedback from the appraisal process is more valid as it is generated from multiple sources. The authors go on

to suggest that this feedback helps the individual become more “self-aware” (p.141) which is an important step in terms of learning and development.

3. The anonymity aspect of 360-degree feedback allows co-workers to praise or criticise individuals without fear of repercussions or confrontation. This also has benefits for the individual as it illuminates their weaknesses within the workforce and gives them an opportunity to identify specific areas for performance improvement.
4. Through engaging with external entities during the feedback process, individuals must place a large emphasis on providing a good customer service. If the individuals or indeed the organization is not providing a high quality service to its customers, this will become apparent through the feedback process from external involvement.
5. Finally, Hoffman (1995) argues: where there is no set standard of performance within an organization in relation to certain tasks or activities, feedback from multiple sources can help create such a standard, through conveying expectations of different facets and dimensions within the organization.

Challenges of 360-degree Feedback

Although there are clear benefits as outlined above for the implementation of a 360-degree feedback approach, as with almost all management initiatives there are also a number of limitations and challenges. Traditionally, organizations are not good at providing feedback either in top-down (performance appraisal) or bottom-up (360-degree) systems. It may take a number of attempts at implementing a successful approach where raters are

comfortable with providing the feedback that is required to make 360-degree feedback a success. Furthermore, the individual being assessed may not initially be accepting of the feedback as they may not understand that it is simply used as a method of improving performance standards. In time, individuals must understand that the appraisal system is not solely about criticism, but rather identifying areas for improvement which in turn will increase potential for salary progression and promotion. The reluctance to accept feedback may be more evident where performance based pay is based on the 360-degree feedback approach (Maylett, 2009). Similarly, a further challenge in relation to this is that raters may not be as willing to criticise the individual if they are aware that the employee's salary or promotion prospects may be adversely affected as a consequence. Some further challenges associated with 360-degree feedback include:

1. Inevitably, feedback will not always be positive and in certain circumstances, the individual may receive a large amount of negative feedback. Kaplan (1993) claims this may cause a defensive reaction within the employee and lead to demotivation within their organizational role. This will ultimately cause a decrease in individual and therefore organizational performance.
2. When 360-degree feedback is introduced as an organization-wide appraisal system, the potential for ‘survey fatigue’ exists due to the possibility of individuals filling out a number of feedback reports about their peers, subordinates or managers (Bracken, 1996; Kaplan, 1993; London and Beatty, 1993). This situation may result in less than accurate evaluation

reports. The organization should make an effort to ensure no employee is charged with filling out excessive amounts of reports to create an 'even spread' across the entire workforce.

3. A further limitation of the 360-degree approach is that the feedback obtained from the multiple raters is most commonly quantitative. This does not allow the raters to discuss specific areas or performance tasks where the individual may have performed well or poorly. The adoption of some qualitative measures within the process would appear to address this issue to a certain extent.
4. Schneier, Shaw and Beatty (1992) suggest that many 360-degree feedback systems are not directly linked to strategic imperatives within the organization. This must be a fundamental concern for all organizations as in the first instance: it is imperative that employee roles and responsibilities are directly aligned with strategy and therefore the evaluation of those roles and responsibilities must also be strategically aligned.
5. Finally, 360-degree feedback requires a significant increase in cost and administrative responsibilities on the entire workforce as almost all employees are involved at some stage of the process (London and Beatty, 1993). Traditional performance appraisals can often be conducted at a far lesser cost to the organization. However, organizations must be willing to sacrifice both cost and time in the short term in order to reap the rewards of a successfully implemented 360-degree feedback approach, which can provide significant more benefit to the organization in increasing overall

performance as compared with the traditional approach.

Conclusions

It is clear that there are a number of associated benefits and challenges that are synonymous with the 360-degree feedback approach. It is also clear that this approach can offer significantly more benefit and more accurate assessment of employee performance in contrast to the traditional performance appraisal approach. It is important to note that 360-degree feedback can be used as both a development tool and as a performance appraisal tool. In comparison to the traditional approach, 360-degree feedback still allows management to assess target achievement; performance in relation to strategy; and any other performance criteria sought by management. The contrasting aspect between the two is that 360-degree feedback provides a far greater insight into the individual's overall performance as multiple aspects and responsibilities of their job are critically appraised from sources that have an intimate knowledge of those areas.

Finally, the 360 degree-feedback approach can also be linked to performance based pay which may have significant consequences in terms of performance. Performance based pay can be linked to the achievement of particular goals within the process rather than an overall performance rating which makes the award of such compensation more valid. However, the focus of the process should still remain on performance improvement through the identification of areas for professional development (Maylett, 2009; McCarthy and Garavan, 2001).

It is clear that the individual is a major factor in determining overall organizational performance standards, and as such it is

imperative that an appropriate performance appraisal and improvement system is in place. This review argues that 360-degree feedback is the most appropriate system in terms of managing this imperative aspect of organizational performance within business management.

Notes on Contributor

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