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Recommendations and insights on evaluating the performance appraisal system from the organisational perspective

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ABSTRACT

Taking the Chinese civil service appraisal system as an example, this paper outlines the effectiveness of the performance appraisal system, which largely depends on the active participation of the performance appraisal process, the strategic use of performance appraisal data, and the development of clear and precise performance appraisal indicators. The present study aimed to explore the perceptions associated with a standardised performance appraisal system within Chinese government agencies. It utilised a qualitative case study methodology complemented by an interpretive framework. It was found that the current system has many problems, causing dissatisfaction among civil servants. Specifically, the performance evaluation indicators are unclear, resulting in a lack of clear guidance for the evaluation. Besides, the evaluation process is considered not very fair, affecting the credibility of the evaluation results; and during the evaluation of civil servants, there is a lack of necessary feedback, preventing civil servants from understanding their own work performance and improvement directions.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The assessment framework for civil servants constitutes a vital element within the broader management system governing civil service personnel. This framework is crucial for improving the overall quality and efficiency of civil service operations. In the context of China, the civil servant assessment system has played a significant role in augmenting governmental efficiency while simultaneously cultivating a heightened sense of accountability and motivation among civil servants. Nonetheless, this system has increasingly revealed certain inadequacies. Delery and Doty (1996) as well as Langley et al. (2013) have noted that management strategies differ across various developmental stages of enterprises, a phenomenon driven by the rapid and unpredictable shifts in the surrounding environment. Similarly, in China, the evaluation criteria for civil servants must adapt to the swift economic growth and evolving social conditions. Therefore, it is imperative to evaluate and refine the assessment system for Chinese civil servants to ensure its continued relevance and effectiveness. For instance, it may be beneficial for the Chinese government to enhance the performance evaluation system to better align with contemporary demands and expectations.

This study presents a case analysis of the civil servant evaluation system as implemented by an organisation in Ningxia. This unit serves as an essential illustration of how the civil servant assessment system can effectively engage and motivate government cadres. The exploration of this topic holds substantial significance for guiding the Chinese government in the formulation of policies and strategies aimed at enhancing the standardisation of performance appraisal systems for civil servants, thereby improving the overall effectiveness of these evaluations. This research enhances our comprehension of the successful implementation of performance management practices among civil servants. The paper begins by reviewing the literature on the "factors influencing performance appraisal." Following this, a case study is conducted to examine the perspectives and beliefs of Chinese civil servants regarding the implementation of a standardised performance appraisal system. Finally, the study delineates the implications and limitations of the findings.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Performance Evaluation

Traditionally, a performance review is considered a formal annual interview that generates social interaction and a plan of action between managers and employees by discussing an individual's previous job performance and future development needs (Murphy & Cleveland, 1995). The main goal of the performance evaluation system is to improve the working efficiency of employees by motivating them to do their best to achieve high performance (Adler et al., 2016; Islami et al., 2018). Performance appraisal systems are being used in many organisations and are also critical for employee management (Diamantidis & Chatzoglou, 2019). (Hassanpour et al., 2022) pointed out that one of the most important tools in an organisation is the performance evaluation system. This is because employees are regarded as strategic assets of an organisation and can determine the survival of the organisation (Liu et al., 2013). Not only has the importance of performance evaluation been widely recognised by scholars, but also has the understanding of studying and solving the defects in the performance evaluation system. Boxall and Purcell (2003) argue that using a specific system to measure employee performance plays a crucial role in organisational performance, and efforts should be made to address the shortcomings of the performance evaluation system (Islami et al., 2018). Existing studies show that China's civil servant assessment system needs to be further improved in practice. For example, the existing civil servant assessment index system is not scientific and systematic in its setting, and it is difficult to ensure the objectivity and fairness of assessment results (Liu & Liu, 2007). This case study was conducted to explore the actual views of civil servants in a certain unit in Ningxia Province on the standardised performance evaluation system. However, before presenting the case study, it is necessary to first discuss the development of China's civil service appraisal system and several factors affecting the implementation of performance appraisal in China.

2.2 Development of China's Civil Servant Assessment System

The growth and development of China's civil servant performance appraisal system can be roughly summarised into three stages. The first stage is the initial stage. In November 1949, the Organisation Department of the Central Committee issued the "Provisions on Cadre Appraisal Work", and the assessment method is mainly based on self-review. In 1979, the Organisation Department of the CPC Central Committee issued the Opinions on the Implementation of the Cadre Evaluation System, which pointed out that "the standards and contents of cadre evaluation should adhere to the principle of both virtue and ability, and according to the conditions that various cadres should have to be qualified for their current posts, the evaluation should be conducted from four aspects: morality, ability, diligence and performance."

The second stage is the normative stage. In the 1990s, a group of Chinese "overseas returnees" returned from overseas study and introduced Western advanced ideas and theories of enterprise human resource management into China. In 1993, China promulgated and implemented the Interim Regulations on Civil Servants, which clearly stipulated the principles, contents, methods, and results of the assessment of civil servants. In 1994, the Ministry of Personnel formulated and promulgated the Interim Regulations on the Assessment of Civil Servants; in 1995, it issued the Notice on Issues Related to the Implementation of the Assessment System of National Civil Servants; in 1996, it issued the Supplementary Notice on Issues Related to the Implementation of the Assessment System of National Civil Servants, which further standardised and improved the assessment and evaluation of civil servants.

The third stage is the development stage. China promulgated the Law on Civil Servants in 2005 and the Regulations on the Assessment of Civil Servants (trial implementation) in 2007. As a formal system, the performance assessment of civil servants has entered the field of socialist society under the rule of law to regulate and control the realisation of public sector management objectives. In December 2018, the Law of the People's Republic of China on Civil Servants was amended to provide for a comprehensive assessment of civil servants' "ethics, diligence, and integrity." Assessment is divided into ordinary assessment, special assessment, and regular assessment, and the results of regular assessment are divided into excellent, competent, basically competent, and incompetent four levels. In 2019, the Organisation Department of the CPC Central Committee issued the Measures for the Ordinary Assessment of Civil Servants, which, for the first time, clarified that the daily work and consistent performance of civil servants should be understood, verified, and evaluated every quarter, and the results of the ordinary assessment should be linked to the results of the annual assessment. In 2020, the "Regulations on the Assessment of Civil Servants" will be revised to focus on the assessment of civil servants' moral and talent performance and work performance, and for the first time, the excellent rank will be linked to the promotion of cadres.

It can be seen from the development of China's civil servant assessment system that the assessment system varies in different stages of China's civil servant management. Especially since 2018, the Chinese government has increased the assessment methods and contents, and increased the effective use of the assessment results, so as to improve the quality and effectiveness of the civil servant assessment system.

2.3 Problematic Components in Performance Appraisal

Grund and Przemek (2012) studied issues related to performance evaluation. They found that abstract criteria or metrics often lead to biased judgments that lead to employee dissatisfaction with test results. The reason for this situation lies in the lack of in-depth research and scientific demonstration on the selection and weight allocation of assessment indicators. For a large proportion of jobs in the modern economy, it is difficult to obtain objective performance indicators, leading employers to rely heavily on supervisors' subjective evaluation to provide job incentives (Prendergast, 1999; Deb et al., 2016). This is particularly prevalent in the public sector because of the inherent problems in measuring individual achievement and the diversity of tasks in most civil service jobs (De Janvry, 2023). While subjective performance measures may enhance contractual power (Gibbons & Murphy, 2004; Baker et al., 1994), they

also open the door to influence activities: employees can take action to influence an evaluator's assessment in their favour, which may harm the interests of the organisation (De Janvry, 2023). Nikpeyma et al. (2014) pointed out that there are also some problems in the performance appraisal process, such as the lack of participation between employees and managers, the assessment results may not be discussed with employees as feedback, or the assessment results cannot be effectively utilised due to the lack of reliable assessment forms.

Previous researchers believe that problems related to performance evaluation arise frequently and are the key issues that every organisation should pay attention to and solve (Lin & Kellough, 2019; Bayo-Moriones et al., 2020; Murphy et al., 2018; Tyskbo, 2020). An organisation's continuous improvement is due to an effective performance evaluation system (Rana & Singh, 2021). Researchers believe that a transparent performance management process can improve the capacity and morale of HR departments (Rana & Singh, 2021). If performance appraisal data is used to reinforce employee strengths and improve performance areas, then employee morale, motivation, and productivity will increase (Mani, 2002). Radebe (2015) reported that performance evaluation in South Africa allows employees to participate, express their opinions on operational objectives, and then jointly consider the development of objectives or criteria for performance evaluation. Based on the above research, we believe that it is necessary to improve the performance appraisal system. Clear appraisal indicators, extensive participation of the appraisal objects in the performance process, and effective use of appraisal data are key factors to improve the performance appraisal system.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study aimed to explore the perceptions associated with a standardised performance appraisal system within Chinese government agencies, utilising a qualitative case study methodology complemented by an interpretive framework as outlined by Neuman (2003). The case study was conducted in Yinchuan City, located in Ningxia Province. This site was selected due to its diverse business portfolio and the implementation of an electronic assessment platform that aligns with the civil servant evaluation system, rendering it an appropriate model for local performance assessment. Additionally, Yinchuan City has engaged in research and accrued experience aimed at enhancing the civil servant appraisal system following its revision in 2020. The research involved six participants, comprising two directors, two deputy directors, and two general officers, representing a few departments such as human resources, social affairs, and general management. The sample consisted exclusively of Chinese individuals in their mid-40s, with a gender distribution of three males and three females. Each participant had a minimum of five years of employment within the organisation at the time of the study and was actively engaged in the evaluation process.

3.1 Data Collection

The data were obtained from three different sources:

- (i) Pilot interviews with six personnel to understand the performance appraisal system undertaken in the company.
- (ii) Performance appraisal documents were analysed, including performance appraisal procedures.
- (iii) In-depth interviews were undertaken with the officers selected. The majority of these in-depth interviews were conducted in Chinese and lasted for a duration of 30 minutes. All respondents were informed that their responses were solely for academic purposes and that their identities were kept confidential following the interview.

There were three main interview questions were asked during the interview sessions:

- (i) Could you provide a brief description of the performance appraisal system in your organisation?
- (ii) What is your perspective on performance evaluations?
- (iii) Do you have any recommendations for enhancing the effectiveness of the existing performance appraisal system?

Table 1. Participants' profiles

Participants	Department	Job position	Age	Organisation tenure (Years)	Length of Interview (minutes)
Participant 1	human resource	Directors	46	11	45
Participant 2	integrated management	Directors	45	15	30
Participant 3	social affairs	Deputy Directors	39	6	30
Participant 4	human resource	Deputy Directors	38	7	30
Participant 5	social affairs	General officers	38	7	30
Participant 6	integrated management	General officers	34	7	30

3.2 Data Analysis

All interviews were conducted in Mandarin Chinese and subsequently recorded for analysis. A thematic analysis approach was employed to interpret the gathered data, which indicates that the findings will encapsulate the recurring themes within the narratives or classify the various character types and settings present in the narratives. Specifically, the perceptions and stories articulated by the respondents will be systematically categorised and examined. Measures to ensure the validity and reliability of the research were implemented. Industry experts were invited to evaluate the content of the performance appraisal framework utilised in this study, and their consensus affirmed that the framework comprehensively addressed all relevant dimensions of the performance appraisal domain. To assess retest reliability, a retest method was employed, which involved conducting repeated interviews with the same participant at different time intervals and subsequently comparing the consistency of the responses across these interviews. The findings revealed that the perspectives of the respondents were consistent across the interviews. The verbatim transcriptions of the interviews are presented to facilitate a discussion of the findings.

The following outlines the detailed steps for extracting the primary viewpoints of respondents from qualitative data using thematic analysis: (1) The research objectives and the specific issues to be investigated are clearly defined. A thorough reading of the interview transcripts is conducted to gain a comprehensive understanding of the perceptions and narratives expressed by the interviewees; (2) An affinity diagramming technique is employed to organise the collected information, grouping similar themes to form distinct categories. Each category is subsequently labelled and prioritised based on its significance. An in-depth analysis of the categorised information is undertaken to identify the underlying causes of the issues and potential solutions; (3) The results of the analysis are systematically organised, encompassing the research objectives, methodologies, findings, and conclusions.

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The following section describes and discusses the key findings. The findings are based on the three research questions, namely: What are the clear appraisal indicators? Why should the appraisal object participate in the performance process? How to effectively use the appraisal data?

4.1 The Performance Appraisal Indicators Are Considered as Ambiguous

Several indicators have been identified as ambiguous in the context of performance appraisal requirements in China. Numerous respondents have indicated that the prevailing criteria for assessment include "morality, ability, diligence, performance, and integrity." However, the specific metrics associated with these criteria remain vague, leading to a diminished level of satisfaction among civil servants regarding the appraisal system. This sentiment is exemplified in the responses provided by participants 5 and 6, with participant 5 articulating a particular concern regarding this lack of clarity.

"Um, I think the assessment indicators are not clear, and it is difficult to say which person is doing more or doing well. Um, For example, in the performance appraisal, the assessor has no way to measure everyone's moral character, ability, diligence and honesty, which are the same for everyone. What can be looked at is only the work performance, and the work performance is submitted to the assessor after a written summary statement by me, without detailed specific indicators."

Similarly, Participant 6 said;

"I think the use of performance evaluations seems to be a fair evaluation, and everyone has the opportunity to achieve excellence. Um, However, in fact, because there are no detailed assessment indicators, the heads of departments evaluate the outstanding personnel based on the subjective impression of the assessed personnel and time observation, Um, and sometimes the excellent personnel evaluated are not convincing."

This suggests that managers may be assessing employees' performance based on their subjective knowledge rather than on objective criteria. This finding is consistent with the suggestion by Stone et al. (2007) that standardised or objective assessment methods are more likely to be implemented in individualistic cultures, while firms in collective cultures are more likely to use informal and subjective assessments.

4.2 The Assessment Is Perceived as Unfair

It is found that civil servants are not involved in the current performance appraisal process in China, which leads civil servants to believe that the appraisal is not fair enough. This can be seen from the responses given by participants 1, 4 and 6. As mentioned by participant 4:

"I believe that if employees can be directly involved in the evaluation of performance reviews, the process will be easier and fairer, and employee satisfaction will increase. Ha-ha, For example I summarise the quarterly and year-end assessments reported by various departments every year, and balance the relationship between them. Yes, Sometimes, it is a very difficult process to decide who to give excellent performance assessment results to. Ha-ha."

Participant 6 said, " Um, I think civil servants should be involved in the performance appraisal process. For example, after I submit my personal summary, Um, I do not know how the assessment process is carried out, I do not know others' evaluation of my work, and I am not allowed to evaluate others. Finally, I can only know the assessment results determined by the human resources department, which may affect my annual performance results."

Participant 1 provided some experience of civil servants' participation in the appraisal process: "We previously conducted a questionnaire and 85% of employees wanted to participate in the performance appraisal process. Um, For example, other units will classify the candidates according to their levels, hold a secret ballot in the way of a general meeting, and select the excellent assessment personnel from different categories according to the excellent ratio, which not only allows employees to participate in the assessment process, reflects the openness and transparency of the assessment, Yes, but also effectively avoids human factors, and the employee satisfaction has increased by nearly 8%."

The above discussion is consistent with the study of Steers and Lee (1982); inviting employees' participation and opinions can at least improve the effectiveness of the appraisal system to a certain extent, and also improve the acceptance and support of the appraisal system. Similarly, our study provides evidence for a research analysis conducted by Chen and Eldridge (2010) showing that participation in the evaluation process is strongly associated with positive responses to the evaluation system, such as the perceived fairness and utility of the evaluation. Therefore, involving employees should improve the effectiveness of the evaluation system.

4.3 The Assessment Is Carried Out Without Feedback Given to Civil Servants

The current performance appraisal system in China has been observed to lack adequate feedback regarding the outcomes of the evaluations. This deficiency hampers civil servants' ability to enhance their work performance and improve efficiency as a result of the appraisal process. Evidence of this issue is reflected in the responses provided by participants 2, 3, and 4. For instance, Participant 2 articulated specific concerns regarding this lack of feedback.:

"Yes, I think you should give me the feedback of the evaluation results and tell me the reasons why I didn't get an excellent grade so that I can know what to do in the future. However, the current situation is that when I complete the personal summary required by the performance appraisal and fill in the performance appraisal form, the head of the department will not talk about my work performance in person or discuss my performance appraisal results with me. However, they may discuss with me the performance of the people in my management office and discuss their evaluation results. Ha-ha."

Participant 3 mentioned:

"I believe that if the assessment department informs the assessment results during or after the assessment, the assessed personnel will feel valued and improve their work through the assessment. For example, at present, each department will recommend personnel with excellent assessment results according to the outstanding quota assigned by the human resources department. Yes, but no one will talk to me and tell me my assessment ranking during the assessment process. As for the reasons for not giving feedback on the assessment results, Ha-ha. I think there are two reasons: if I am an excellent ranking, the head of the department will avoid suspicion for fear that others will think him unfair; If I am not excellent, the head of the department will feel that it is unnecessary, and I will lose face to give feedback in person, and everyone will be embarrassed, or avoid direct communication for fear that I have emotions. While I could understand, the lack of feedback made me feel unvalued and that the review was just a formality and that I didn't have to improve my work."

Participant 4 said:

"After the performance appraisal notice was issued, I still had to make many calls to urge all departments to report the preliminary appraisal results. Otherwise, they may not be able to report the results within the prescribed time frame, Yes, and the reason for this may be related to the attitude of the heads of departments towards the performance evaluation and the difficult balance between the performance evaluation results."

The findings presented align with Shen's (2008) observation that feedback is often withheld from those being evaluated due to the perception that such feedback is unnecessary. Furthermore, as previously noted, delivering feedback to subordinates in a face-to-face manner may lead to a loss of dignity for employees, which could subsequently hinder the advancement of departmental objectives and the quality of interpersonal relationships. Consequently, it is not surprising that managers tend to minimise communication with underperforming employees. Nevertheless, considering that a primary objective of performance appraisal is to facilitate employee performance enhancement through feedback (Murphy & Cleveland, 1995), it is imperative that future research endeavours aim to elucidate the dynamics between performance feedback and employee performance more comprehensively.

5. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

After an overview of the existing performance evaluation system within the organisation, the study found that the current system has many problems, causing dissatisfaction among civil servants. Specifically, the performance evaluation indicators are unclear, resulting in a lack of clear guidance for the evaluation; the evaluation process is considered not very fair, affecting the credibility of the evaluation results; and during the evaluation of civil servants, there is a lack of necessary feedback, preventing civil servants from understanding their own work performance and improvement directions.

The effectiveness of the existing performance evaluation system can be improved. The study collected various viewpoints and suggestions, mainly covering the following three key aspects:

First, formulate detailed evaluation indicators. In the evaluation indicators, the specific contents of work performance should be clearly defined, such as the number of organisational meetings, the quantity of written materials, the number of times receiving praise and commendation at work, etc., and specific scores should be set for each task. These indicators should be determined at the beginning of the year and objectively quantified during each evaluation to ensure that work performance is measured through objective indicators, minimising the interference of subjective factors.

Second, promote the participation of evaluation objects in the evaluation process. During the evaluation, the evaluation objects should be grouped according to their position levels, and a certain proportion of excellent indicators should be assigned to each group. The evaluated personnel should submit their self-check scoring sheets to the evaluation platform, and then vote anonymously at the general meeting, selecting outstanding personnel from different categories according to the excellent proportion or the evaluated objects in the same group should evaluate and score each other, and select the top-ranked personnel. Through this method, let the evaluation objects participate in the evaluation process, improving the openness and transparency of the evaluation, and thereby enhancing the satisfaction with the evaluation.

Third, attach importance to the application of evaluation results. On the basis of setting detailed evaluation indicators and conducting an open and transparent evaluation procedure, the evaluator should have face-to-face communication with the evaluated person and promptly provide feedback on the evaluation results. The feedback content mainly includes the work performance of the evaluated person and their ranking in the evaluation score, helping the evaluated person clearly understand the gap between themselves and others, and thereby improving work efficiency and targeted improvement of work.

Nevertheless, this research has certain limitations. The data is only from one organisation, the sample size is small, and it only reflects the viewpoints of a few respondents. Therefore, future research needs to expand the sample range, include the opinions of other organisations to more comprehensively and accurately outline the blueprint for improving the performance evaluation system in the Chinese context.

6. CONTRIBUTION OF AUTHORS

Zhuang Xingmei carried out the research and wrote the article. Noorziah Mohd Salleh wrote the article, supervised research progress, anchored the review, revisions, and approved the article submission.

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8. CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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