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Organizational Context Factors Influencing Employee Performance Appraisal: A Research Framework

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Abstract

Trends in the current literature emphasize the role of the organizational context in employee performance appraisal processes (e.g. Levy & Williams, 2004; Armstrong & Ward, 2005 and Murphy & DeNisi, 2008). The current study aims to develop a comprehensive research framework in order to investigate the employee performance appraisal systems and processes based on main organizational contextual dimensions, in highlighting the relevance of customization according to a company's specific organizational context. In addition, focusing on a strategic approach on human resources management, the study offers insights on the role of organizational context in developing employee performance appraisal systems that could contribute to higher performance in overall organizational strategy implementation.

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1. Introduction

Increased employee performance represents an important objective for companies in order to maintain their business success. As a consequence, the organizational effort is directed towards improving individual performance, taking into account the organizational context in which the performance is produced (Den Hartog, Boselie, & Paauwe, 2004). Formulated this way, contextual factors, such as cultural norms or the impact of new technologies, characteristic to all organizations, are part of performance management processes and need to be accounted for as an important research interest (Fletcher, 2001).

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Furthermore, new approaches concerning employee performance appraisal systems in different companies should be based on their specific organizational context (Iqbal, Akbar, & Budhwar, 2014), though developing new models on organizational contexts in relation to employee performance appraisal is of utmost theoretical and practical interest.

Therefore, in the light of this research, the main purpose of this paper is to identify the prevalent organizational contextual factors with a significant influence on employee performance appraisal process, and, as a consequence, with a positive impact on increased employee work performance.

To achieve this purpose, the paper has covered the following specific objectives:

- To identify the prevalent contextual factors with a significant influence on employee performance appraisal, based on the current literature research models;
- To identify the main dimensions of the HR management context, highlighting the role of HR motivation as a dynamic organizational factor;
- To develop a flexible research framework highlighting the influence of organizational context factors on employee performance appraisal.

2. The organizational context

2.1. The context of employee performance appraisal

Studies referring to different organizational contexts emphasize that employee performance appraisal should be adjusted to the organizational context where it takes place (Molapo, 2002). The employee performance appraisal should be customized according to each organization context in order to be effective in fostering employee work performance. Moreover, Molapo (2002) emphasizes that the internal environment of an organization, such as lack of equipment, lack of materials and the workplace environment itself, can determine low levels of performance, and the methods applied to employee performance appraisal should take into consideration such circumstances.

Another study outlines the importance of establishing compatibility between employee performance appraisal and the organizational context of the company where it is implemented (Pulakos, 2009) and recommends to consider the compatibility between the organization's context and infrastructure, as well as the existing support for implementing an adequate performance management system.

Thus, it is important to highlight that the management team should consider factors, such as organizational culture, legal framework, the organizational policy, etc. in developing effective employee performance appraisal (Herreid, 2006). Also, according to a study of Mohram et al. (1991) (in Herreid, 2006), the main characteristics of effective performance appraisal are: 1) flexibility in rapport to changes occurring to the specific organizational context, and 2) being aligned to company's vision and main objectives. Therefore, in order to develop effective employee performance appraisal, managers should identify and consider the most important organizational contextual factors since these factors have an outstanding impact on their employees' levels of performance.

2.2. Contextual factors influencing employee performance appraisals in organizations

According to studies on effective performance management in organizations, particularly emphasizing high levels of employee performance, the organizational context is very important for successfully accomplish company's strategy and objectives (St-Onge & Morin, 2009; Haines III & St. Onge, 2012). Therefore, in the overall context of business globalization, authors focus on outlining the role of particular organizational contexts where employee performance appraisals take place, outlining the interest on future research comprising the wider cross-cultural context (Den Hartog, Boselie, & Paauwe, 2004).

Moreover, Erdogan (2002) highlights the role of social context of employee performance appraisal, mentioning the role of contextual factors represented by the perceived organizational support, organization culture, and the quality of the exchange (relationship) between members and the leader. It is noteworthy that the organizational context was associated with employees' perceptions on system's practices and on leader's behaviors, being also related to employees' trust in team management or organizational citizenship behavior (Zheng, Zhang, & Li, 2012).

It may also be noticed that recent studies on employee performance appraisal evolved from emphasis on performance measurement to focus on organizational context, according to Murphy & Cleveland (1991) (in Zheng, Zhang, & Li, 2012). Accordingly, it should be outlined that employee performance appraisal represents a motivational and social process, a consequence of interactions between employees and the company through managers' interventions (Zheng, Zhang, & Li, 2012).

3. Recent trends in employee performance appraisal research

The evolution of employee performance appraisal reflects a challenge for nowadays organizations represented by the dynamics of internal and external factors. Contextual factors, such as structure, policies and systems, etc., have a significant role, embedding a broader approach of performance management in employee performance appraisal in purpose to enhance both individual and organizational performance (Edmonstone, 1996). Dattner (2015) also underlines the importance of considering the appraisal context for devising effective employee performance appraisal systems. The same author highlights that, according to the activity profile or size, etc., each organization ought to promote its own customized approach in designing and implementing employee performance appraisal, focusing on informal feedback (e.g. in start-ups) or as part of structured systems, using specific evaluation criteria and platforms which allow the collection and analysis of qualitative or quantitative data (e.g., in large companies) (Dattner, 2015). Furthermore, the role of establishing customized performance standards according to the organizational context where employees' performance appraisal takes place has been highlighted, in order to define different expectations for different jobs, according to the object of activity of the company where these are implemented (Pulakos, 2009).

On the other hand, employee performance is influenced by the perception and understanding of organizational culture, climate, and interactions of employees with their peers. In such a context, organizational factors are considered in relation with performance results, determining a continuing redesign of performance appraisal and management systems and processes where the organizational context is considered in a larger context (the industry, etc.) (Goodall et al., 1986, McKenna, Richardson, & Manroop, 2011).

Moreover, recent studies on performance management processes emphasize that employee performance appraisal takes place in a social context and that the context contributes to the appraisals' effectiveness and to participants' reactions to the process (MacDonald & Sulsky, 2009). Specifically, in their recent work, authors Pichler, Varma, Michel, Levy, Budhwar & Sharma (2015) highlight the social context of the performance appraisal, mentioning the role of the exchange of information between manager and employee, with impact on procedural justice and performance appraisal, suggesting future research focus on motivation to improve performance leading to better understanding of reactions regarding appraisal and future intentions on performance. In this context, the focus on the relationship between employee and manager emphasizes that the performance management system might be successful by improving the communication between manager and employee and, consequently, the performance management systems in particular organizational contexts (Pulakos & O'Leary, 2011). The effectiveness of the performance management system may be related to the social context of performance appraisal, as daily behaviors and interactions have a significant role (Pulakos, Mueller Hanson, Arad & Moye, 2015). Moreover, authors Levy, Silverman & Cavanaugh (2015) also emphasize the role of social context of performance appraisal on the approach and effectiveness of employees' performance management system.

Furthermore, the effectiveness of employee performance management is influenced by contextual factors, such as organizational culture, climate and the strategic integration of human resource management (Haines III & St-Onge, 2012). The authors underline the role of organizational culture that reflects employees' engagement identified through a shared mission, a relational climate referring to the nature of social relationships between the management team and the employees, and the strategic integration of human resource management, which highlights that performance management has a significant importance, as it is a strategic integrated part of the system of human capital practices, encompassing important strategic objectives of the company. Consequently, it is recommended that managers should consider the role of the organizational context where the employee performance appraisal takes place in order to enable the effectiveness and enhancement of employee performance management, including employee performance appraisal systems and processes.

4. Emphasis on contextual factors in employee performance appraisal models

4.1. The organizational context: key dimensions

According to the recent trends in employee performance management and employee performance appraisal research presented above we selected key dimensions of the organizational context to be included in our proposed research framework. We focused on two similar models, Levy & Williams' (2004) and Murphy & DeNisi's (2008), that include contextual factors influencing employee performance appraisal with a positive impact on individual performance improvement. Considering the first model of Levy & Williams' (2004), the authors organized the identified contextual factors in proximal and distal factors, the first category of proximal factors being also organized in process and structural factors (Levy & Williams, 2004). The process proximal factors have "a direct impact on how appraisal process is conducted including things such accountability or supervisor-subordinate relationships" (Levy & Williams, 2004, pp. 885-886), whereas the structural factors refer to "the configuration or makeup of the appraisal itself" and include "things like the appraisal dimensions or frequency of appraisal" (Levy & Williams, 2004, p. 886).

According to Murphy & DeNisi (2008) there are sets of proximal and distal factors which influence the employee performance appraisal, where the most important proximal factors are the purpose of the appraisal, organizational norms and the acceptance of the performance appraisal system, and the prominent distal factors refer to industry norms, national culture norms, the strategy and company's performance, the legal system and the technology employed. The authors also identify intervening factors with an impact on employee performance appraisal, such as frequency, appraiser-employee relationships, appraiser motivation, perceived purposes and uses of the appraisal data.

However, recent work highlighting the influence of contextual factors on improving results and behavior regarding performance appraisal also indicate proximal contextual factors, such as beliefs and attitudes about the appraisal system and the orientation to appraisal system, and distal contextual factors, such as employees attitudes and beliefs about their organization and attitudes toward the organization moderated by rater personality (Tziner, 2015).

Based on these findings, we selected the following organizational contextual factors to construct our proposed research model: **strategy, technology, prevailing cultural norms, perceived purposes and uses of employee performance appraisal data.**

We selected these contextual factors in relation to their frequency of appearance in Murphy & DeNisi's (2008) and Levy & Williams' (2004) models, congruent with our research goal: to identify the prevalent contextual factors with a significant influence on employee performance appraisal processes, and, consequently, with potential influence on increased employees' performance.

Armstrong & Ward (2005) provide another model we considered significant in designing our research model in emphasizing the importance that "organizations think about performance management in their own context". They propose seven key elements identified as being a part of the business context that should be included in any model of performance management: clarity and culture, learning organizations, role of human resources (HR), measurement and reward, motivation, capability to manage people, and the process itself.

Of these seven elements we considered the following as having a significant utility for the current study: **motivation (processes), the role of HR (procedures), clarity of procedures from a cultural perspective, reward systems in relation to performance appraisal systems and processes.**

We selected these factors in relation to our research goal, where the HR management context is one of the prevalent contextual factors in organizations, thus justifying our focus on employee reward systems, HR procedures, clarity of procedures, and HR motivation as a dynamic organizational factor. Also, we added another important element of the HR context, **organization of the HR department**, as we consider this as having a significant influence on the approach and implementation of employee performance appraisal in organizations.

4.2. *Highlights on motivational factors in an employee performance appraisal model*

According to the research models presented above, the motivational factor was identified as a component of the organizational context, with a dynamic role in organizations. Also, according to Armstrong & Ward (2005) and Pritchard & Diazgranados (2008), the role of motivational elements in an employee performance management model is vital. For instance, Armstrong & Ward (2005) identify motivation as the „forgotten element” (p. 15), as “the extent to which the organization’s approach to PM [performance management] unlocks discretionary effort among its employees” (p. 11).

However, referring to performance improvement, DeNisi & Smith (2014) mention as well the importance of the employee motivation, suggesting the focus on “the process through which an individual employee might be motivated to improve his or her performance” (p. 133). In a similar way, the research of the International Society for Performance Improvement (2013) underlines the role of employee motivation and actions, referring to organizations trying to improve performance focusing on the worker level, which may lead to potential improved results (Society for Performance Improvement, 2013).

Consequently, we considered employee motivation as a dynamic factor of organizational context, with a significant influence on employee performance appraisal and on individual work performance improvement. This approach regarding the role of employees’ motivation as a dynamic factor in an employee performance management model has been highlighted in the literature, referring to the overall motivational process, which provide dynamics and involves the change variable in measuring employee motivation (Osteraker, 1999). In our research model we used content and process elements of employee motivation, selected from recent and relevant research in this field.

For content motivation factors, we based our model on the work of Nohria, Groysberg, & Lee (2008) that refer to four drives enhancing employee motivation: the drive to acquire (physical goods, housing, money, etc.), the drive to bond, the drive to comprehend (satisfying the curiosity of individuals) and the drive to defend (defending values, accomplishments). In addition, the authors identify organizational levers of motivation, such as the reward system (satisfies employees’ drive to acquire), organizational culture (satisfies employees’ drive to bond), job design (satisfies the need to comprehend), and performance management and resource-allocation processes (help to meet employees’ drive to defend).

For process motivation factors we considered DeNisi & Pritchard’s (2006) model, further developed by Pritchard & Diazgranados (2008). The model outlines that, for enhancing employee performance, some basic elements should be outlined, such as actions (the energy and effort to accomplish tasks), appraisals, results, outcomes, or the need for satisfaction. Employee motivation will be higher if a set of conditions were accomplished: the individuals see a strong relationship between results and good appraisers’ ratings; individuals recognize a strong relationship between ratings and outcomes/rewards; the outcomes/rewards are important for employees as they see a strong relationship between their level and the anticipated level of need for satisfaction (Pritchard & Diazgranados, 2008).

5. **Strategies for increasing employee work performance**

5.1. *A comparative review of research models on contextual factors influencing employee performance appraisal processes*

Current literature underline the need to direct research in the field of human resource performance appraisal *to identifying new methods to improve employees’ performance* (DeNisi & Gonzalez, 2004) by developing a *motivational framework* (DeNisi & Pritchard, 2006) and by emphasizing the role of *contextual factors* influencing employee performance appraisal (Levy & Williams, 2004; Armstrong & Ward, 2005 and Murphy & DeNisi, 2008).

Following, we considered relevant for our research to set focus on the influence of contextual factors on employee performance improvement, including employee motivation as a process factor of the organizational context (Armstrong & Ward, 2005). In sustaining this approach, DeNisi & Pritchard (2006) highlight that employee performance appraisal should be redirected towards performance improvement within a motivational framework helping organizations to identify methods to use employee performance appraisal as a means to improve employee performance.

Moreover, in reviewing the current theoretical models on the influence of organizational context factors on employee performance appraisal, we proposed a comparative analysis of the performance appraisal process model by Murphy & DeNisi (2008) and of the seven key elements of the performance management model by Armstrong & Ward (2005), as both models are representative for this field of research and both have motivational components, as shown in the table below:

Table 1. Research on the contextual factors influencing employee performance appraisal process.

Employee performance	Contextual factors	Unit of analysis	Research model
1. Performance management effectiveness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Processes • Clarity and culture • Measurement and rewards • Motivation • HR role, etc. 	Members of the organization: employees, managers	Armstrong & Ward (2005)
2. Employee performance improvement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Proximal factors – appraisal purpose, organizational norms, acceptance of appraisal system • Distal factors – cultural norms, strategy and company's performance, legal system, technology • Intervening factors – appraisal frequency, source of appraisal, appraiser – employee relationships, appraiser motivation, perceived uses and purposes of the appraisal • Judgmental factors – time pressure, recall of performance, etc. • Distortion factors – appraisal consequences, reward systems • Performance rating and feedback • Judgment 	Members of the organization	Murphy & DeNisi (2008)

5.2. Developing the research framework

The main objective of this paper is to identify the prevalent organizational contextual factors with a significant influence on employee performance appraisal, and, consequently, with potential influence on increased employee performance.

Considering the main organizational context dimensions in studying employee performance appraisal could lead to the development of a flexible research framework that provides the opportunity to be used as a strategy to increase employee work performance. At this level, our approach considering the human resource as a strategic partner in different organizational contexts seems to be related to the proposed Human Performance Technology (HPT), applied in all sizes and types of organizations and based on performance improvement process related to people (Pershing, 2006). According to the HPT model proposed by the International Society for Performance Improvement (2015), the HPT process includes a cause analysis determining the impact of the work environment (resources, incentives, etc.) and people (represented by their motivation, their skills, etc.) on performance and improvement of business outcomes (Society for Performance Improvement, 2015).

Based on the two research models reviewed above, Murphy & DeNisi (2008) and Armstrong & Ward (2005), we identified a set of contextual factors suited to our research objectives that we organized in two categories: process factors and structural factors.

We identified motivation and technology as process factors (Levy & Williams, 2004), whereas the other factors identified in the current research framework presented below were considered structural factors of the organizational context (Levy & Williams, 2004):

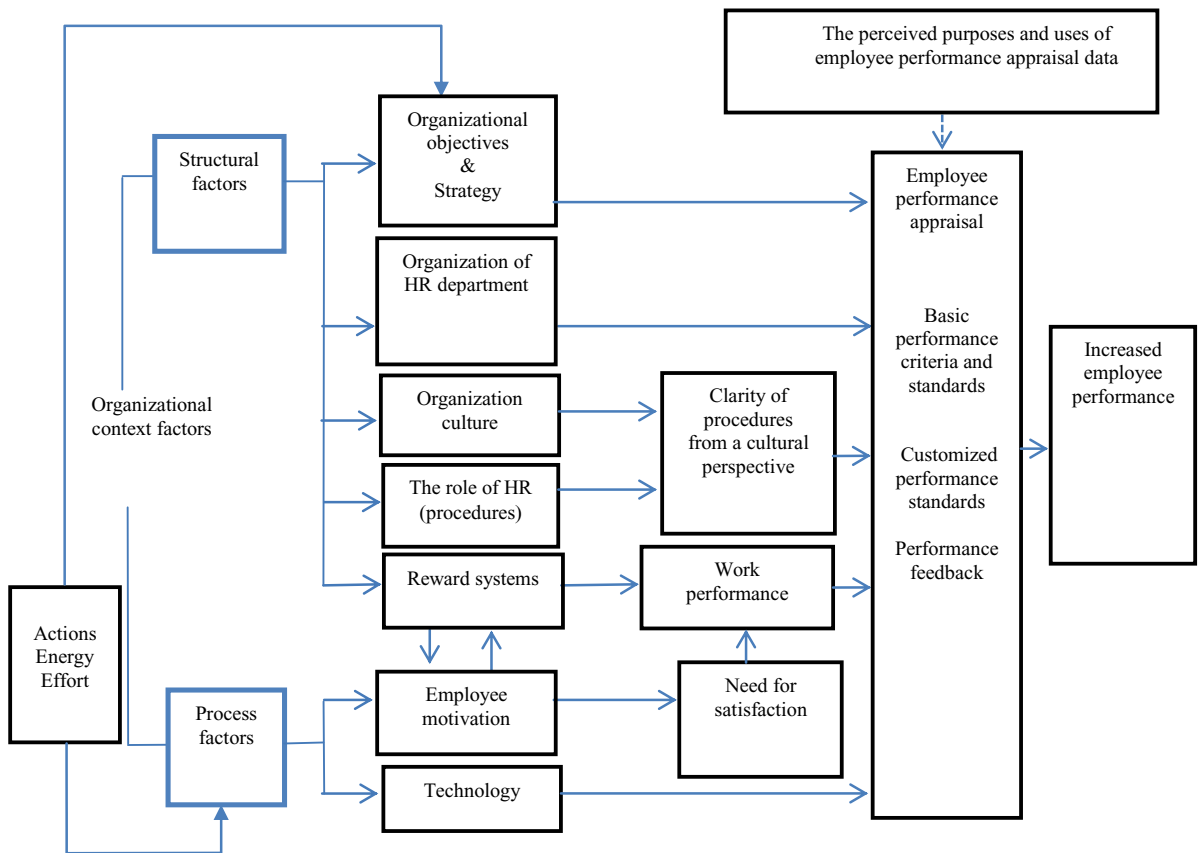


Fig. 1. The relationships between organizational context factors and employee performance appraisal: a research framework

According to the research framework developed above, we stressed out the importance of the contextual factors, organized in process and structural factors, as having a significant influence on employee performance appraisal with an impact on work performance.

There are highlighted employees' actions, energy and effort, representing their motivation enhanced by satisfying the four drives (the drive to acquire, the drive to bond, the drive to comprehend and the drive to defend) identified by Nohria, Groysberg, & Lee (2008) and directed to accomplish the organizational objectives and strategy. Considering motivation and the need for satisfaction as dynamic organizational driving factors, we introduced the HR management context as one of the key contextual factors to be tested in companies.

Moreover, the organizational objectives and strategy, and the focus on the HR management context, with an emphasis on the organization of the HR department, HR procedures, employee reward systems, clarity of procedures, and HR motivation as a dynamic organizational factor influence the design and implementation of employee performance appraisal systems and processes.

Organizational culture, considered a structural factor with direct influence on the clarity of procedures, and the technology used, considered as a process factor, also influence the performance appraisal process by developing, starting from a basic set of performance criteria and standards, the customized performance standards according to the organizational context where employee performance appraisal takes place.

Finally, the current flexible research framework underlines the influence of process and structural factors of the organizational context on employee performance appraisal with a foreseen impact on employee work performance and on the overall organizational performance.

6. Conclusions and recommendations

The paper emphasizes the role of the organizational context in conducting employee performance appraisal in organizations. Current trends in human resource performance show that, in order to target increased employee performance, research should focus on employee performance appraisal and on the influence of organizational context factors on this process. Thus, factors of organizational context such as organizational objectives, strategy, technology, organizational culture, HR procedures, employee motivation, etc. influence the design and implementation of employee performance appraisal in organizations. Consequently, an approach to employee performance appraisal consistent with the organizational context represents a powerful strategy for increasing human resources performance.

The proposed research framework highlights the key process and structural factors of the organizational context, with a focus on the HR context and employee motivation which have a significant influence on employee performance appraisal as an important instrument with a potential positive impact on employee work performance. It also underlines the importance of customization of performance criteria and standards used for employee performance appraisal in relation to the organizational context in order to foster employee work performance as well as the overall company performance.

As our review of the literature suggests, we considered the most important research models focusing on the two categories of process and structural contextual factors with an influence on employee performance appraisal process, which will eventually translate into employee performance improvement. Accordingly, we selected the most important contextual factors with a noteworthy influence on the employee performance appraisal approach, based on the utility for accomplishing the objectives of the current study and on the frequency of their appearance on the research models we analyzed. It is important to note that we highlighted the employee motivation as a contextual factor, with a dynamic role in the proposed framework, by adding employees' actions, energy and efforts to achieving specific organizational objectives. Thus, we believe that the integration of these contextual dimensions influencing employee performance appraisal process, with a positive expected outcome on increasing employee performance in particular organizational contexts, represents a strong strategy for individual performance improvement.

The current paper aims to provide a comprehensive research framework for investigating organizational factors influencing performance appraisal processes. Future fieldwork research will be undertaken, targeting Romanian industrial companies, in order to test and validate the conceptual model developed. In the light of this research, future investigations should consider incorporating additional contextual factors into the model, according to the research results, in order to identify the most important factors which might have a significant influence on the employee performance appraisal, with positive impact on increasing the individual work performance and the overall company performance.

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