PERCEPTIONS OF ORGANISATIONAL READINESS FOR THE PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT SYSTEM: A CASE STUDY OF A UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY

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Abstract

The absence of a single performance management system (PMS) aligned to institutional strategy and business processes often results in failure to deliver anticipated benefits as it is not cascaded down to all departments, teams or individuals. This study aims to determine employees' expectations for the proposed PMS and their perceptions of the system's impact on effectiveness within the university concerned. This study adopted a quantitative research design and a survey method was used, whereby, a structured questionnaire was administered by the researcher to a selected population size of 150 of which 108 completed questionnaires, generating a response rate of 72%.

The study reflects a disproportionately high percentage of 34% of the respondents who disagreed and 21.3% who were undecided as to whether PMS is needed at the university concerned where the majority of these respondents being academics and those with matriculation. The university concerned should develop a PMS which is aligned to the university strategic plan and to other university policies coupled with structured change management interventions focusing on academics and semi-skilled employees.

Keywords: Performance Management System, Rewards Strategies, Effectiveness, Academics

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Introduction

At South African universities, performance management (PM) systems are more or less obsolete due to the fact that employees's job descriptions are not aligned to departmental and university objectives. The failure of the system is exacerbated by factors such as approved strategic objectives that are not cascaded down to the level of employees, unfair and unequal systems on which remuneration and reward is based (Burney, Henle & Widener, 2009; Chan, 2004), absence of continual feedback (Matunhu & Matunhu, 2008: 11), inadequate internal communication, and unrealistic expectations in terms of rewards (Brennan & Shah, 2000). However, a number of commentators, especially those within the education sector, regard this managerialistic approach to performance appraisal as unwarranted, counter productive (Scholtes, 1999) and unworkable and unacceptable in knowledge-based organisations (Simon, 2001: 91). Other authors describe it as antithetical to a self-governing community of professionals, an infringement of academic freedom, based on a top-down approach to research and teaching which severely restricts creativity and self-development, or a covert means of introducing greater governmental control of the Higher Education and Further Education sectors and increasing the remuneration of those who work in them (Barry, Chandler & Clark, 2001; Holly & Olivier, 2000; Henson, 1994; and Townley, 1990).

This study intends to answer whether the respondents perceive PMS as having an impact on the effectiveness within the university concerned as well as to whether expectations will be clarified and feedback provided on the employees performance. Whilst, the chief objectives of this study were to determine the perceptions of employees on the impact of PMS on bringing the effectiveness, clarified expectations and providing feedback to employees on performance. Meanwhile, there is a paucity of published data on the perceptions of employees in universities on their expectations and impact of PMS in bringing effectiveness before the system being implemented. This study will add value to the body of knowledge in the South African universities as human resources managers will understand what factors they must take into consideration when planning and implementing PMS.

Theoretical Approach

Employees' expectations and feedback on PMS

Failure to link job descriptions to departmental strategic plans and those of the institution lead to weaknesses and under-performance as a job description clearly describes expectations and desired performance required of an employee. Furthermore, unclear understanding of roles and responsibilities between the line manager and the subordinate tends to cause animosity. As Fullan & Scott (2009: 37) pinpoint another angle on the misalignment problem: the failure of individual position descriptions, performance plans, accountability, and reward and staff development systems to focus on the capabilities and priorities for effective delivery, the quality of day-to-day delivery in research and teaching, and the implementation of key quality improvements.

Hypothesis$_1$: PMS is necessary as it will impact on clarified expectations and performance feedback given to employees within the university concerned.

Hence, universities' strategic plans are not cascaded to tactical and operational levels and are further separated from the strategic management environment, which makes it difficult for the perfomance indicators and targets to be achieved. Smith & Cronje (1992: 115) define the strategy as the formulation of an organisation's vision and mission, and subsequent actions to achieve the vision and mission. Therefore, performance plans are expected to emanate from the university's approved strategic plan. Minnaar (2010: 54) maintains that performance plans are not a list of projects, but that they are directly related to the institutional mandate and must contain activities required to maintain present levels of service rendering, as well as those that aim to expand the current scope of services, usually through project interventions. Employees have expectations based on objectives which they perceive should be set out in such a way that they are specific, measurable, achievable, relevant and time-bound (SMART), so that both line manager and employee can determine how the employee is performing.

For an employee to achieve the agreed SMART and deliverable objectives, the competencies should be identified and recorded in the form of the Personal Development Plans (PDPs). Armstrong (2001: 191) asserts that both parties in the PM process will also need guidance and training in the use of competencies, the preparation of performance agreements and plans, the preparation for and conducting of perfomance reviews, ratings and the completion of review forms. Bernthal, Rogers & Smith (2003) contend that PM programs also provide a unique mechanism for ongoing feedback and development, a critical component of engagement. After setting goals together, managers and employees can track progress and ensure that performance stays in alignment with goals and changing work conditions. Continuous feedback facilitates performance by helping employees to refocus their behaviour when they get off track. During performance reviews, managers can provide more specific feedback relative to goals to help employees identify strengths and areas for development. In this way, new performance goals can be set to leverage employee strengths and provide opportunities to address developmental or career goals. Armstrong (2001: 191) believes that some of the skills and procedures, such as providing feedback, coaching, counselling and rating will be practised by managers so that subordinates are fully aware of the expected duties and responsibilities.

Impact of PMS on effectiveness

There is little evidence that PMS can accomplish organisational/team/individual objectives, which in turn can make a positive contribution to organisational effectiveness, as there is little clarity about what practices make a PMS effective in universities. There are objectives that need to be accomplished by organisations, which include motivating performance, helping individuals to develop their competencies (Maybodi, 2010:83), building a performance culture (Cameron & Quinn, 1999), determining who should be promoted, eliminating individuals who are poor performers and helping implement organisational strategies. Edward (2003) indicates that virtually every organisation has a PMS that is expected to accomplish a number of important objectives with respect to human capital management and further development.

Hypothesis$_2$: PMS is necessary as it will impact on effectiveness within the university concerned.

Effective feedback based on agreed and understoond objectives and job requirements, specific to agreed objectives, accurate, relevant, balanced, alternative and timely solutions enable the implementation of the PMS to go smoothly. Edward (2003: 3) reveals considerable research which shows that PM effectiveness increases when there is ongoing feedback, behaviour-based measurements are used and trained raters are employed. However, there is one potential determinant of PMS effectiveness, that has received relatively little attention: how closely the results of the PMS are tied to significant rewards. Whilst, different empirical studies have been conducted on job satisfaction and its link to rewards (Probst & Brubaker, 2001), rewards as a tool to promote effectiveness of employees (Hinkin & Schriesheim, 2004) and enhancing participation and effective commitment (Travaglione & Marshal, 2006).

Some studies have highlighted the important role played by a PMS, claiming that it converts human performance into dollar values (Bernthal, Rogers & Smith, 2003), increases productivity (Houston, 2000), and improves organisational culture (Rose, Kumar, Abdullar & Ling, 2008). Armstrong (2001: 5) maintains that PM embraces all formal and informal measures adopted by an organisation to increase corporate, team and individual effectiveness, and to continuously develop knowledge, skill and competence. The main aim of this empirical study was to gauge the perceptions of employees on the impact of the system on effectiveness, expectations clarifications and feedback on PMS outcome.

Research Approach

The present study is based on the quantitative research design, whereby descriptive statistics, namely measures of central tendency and measures of dispersion, were used to describe the distribution of scores on each variable and to determine whether the scores on different variables are related to each other. In this study, a survey research method was adopted which addressed the dimensions of the PMS in terms of its impact on effectiveness, expectations and feedback within the university concerned. The primary and secondary data was utilised to elicit information on the PMS.

In addition, factor analysis was used in this empirical study with the aim of establishing whether four (4) measures do, in fact, measure the same thing. Hence, principle component analysis was used as the extraction method, and the rotation method was Varimax with Kaizer Normalisation.

Research method

Research participants and sampling procedure

This quantitative study adopted a stratified random sampling and the university employees were identified as the total population. Underhill and Bradfield (1998) confirm that stratification is useful when the population is composite in nature, and can be divided into sub-populations that are distinct in characteristics of interest.

The employees of the university concerned were divided into three categories, namely, academic, academic support and administration support. A structured questionnaire was administered by the researcher to a population size of 150 as per Sekeran's (1992) recommended population size. Of the selected scientific sample, 108 completed the questionnaire generating a response rate of 72% which was used for the final analysis of this study.

There were 50% males and females respectively who responded, wherein, 64.4% were between the ages of 25-44 years. Of this 21.3% (23) were females who were between 25-34 years. Nearly half of the respondents (47.2) had postgraduate qualifications. It was observed that by gender, there were no significant differences (male-24.1%) and (female-23.1%) in the number of respondents having the same qualification. Nearly 15% (14.8%) of the respondents had a postgraduate degree were between the ages of 25-34 years. Of the sample 25.9% (28) were academics, 22.2% (24) academic support and 51.9% were administration support. Most 64.8% were at non-management level, 15.7% at junior management, 14.8% at middle management and 4.6% at senior management. Of all the senior managers, 40% had a tenure for at least 20 years. Half of this (20%) was for Academic Managers and the other half for Administration Support Managers. Amongst the description for job type, Administration Support Managers comprised 25% of the respondents. When looking at tenure, this group made up 50% of the respondents.

Two major aspects of precision (reliability and validity) were used in this study to ensure that the researcher used the appropriate instrument to produce consistent results. The sampling approach was considered relevant because this study is empirical and its aim is to assess the expectations of employees and examine the employees' perceptions on the perceived impact of PMS on effectiveness thereof. The questionnaire was piloted to ten employees with the aim of identifying any errors, as well as testing the perceived validity and reliability of the questionnaire.

Measuring instruments

A self-developed structured questionnaire using a five-point Likert scale was developed to assess the key dimensions of PMS (current perceptions on the impact on effectiveness and current expectations for the PMS. The five-point scale ranging from (1) strongly disagree, (2) disagree, (3) undecided, (4) agree to (5) strongly agree, was used. The Likert scale was used as it enables certain arithmetical operations to be performed on the data collected from the respondents and it also measures the magnitude of the differences among the individuals. The questionnaire the researcher developed for this study consisted of three sections. Section A contained biographical data about age, gender, education, tenure, job type and current job level. Section B (10 sub-dimensions) aimed to gauge employee's perceptions on their expectation and the perceived impact of the PMS at the university concerned. An example of a sampled sub-dimension was 'PMS is needed in my organisation'. An example of the response scale was 'the disporportionately high percentage of 34.3% who disagreed, 21.3% who were undecided and 44.4% who agreed that PMS is needed in this organisation.

Section C contained 8 sub-dimensions aimed to identify employee's perceptions on the PMS impact on effectiveness. Overall, 78% of the respondents agreed with the sub-dimensions on average, with 5% disagreeing. The first four sub-dimensions showed higher levels of agreement than the remaining four. Even though the percentage disagreeing did not vary much, the levels of uncertainty pertaining to the last four sub-dimensions was approximately double those of the first four.

Research procedure

This study used a structured questionnaire which was administered by the researcher to a population size of 150 within the university concerned.

Empirical Findings

Statistical analysis

The data collected from the respondents was analysed using Predictive Analytic Software (PASW) Statistics version 18.0 for data capturing, presentation, analysis and interpretation. Descriptive and inferential statistics were used for data analysis and interpretation. Inferential statistics in the form of Pearson Correlation Matrix was used in this study to indicate the direction, strength and significance of the bivariate relationship among the sub-dimensions of the PMS. In addition, the psychometric properties of the questionnaire were statistically assessed using Factor Analysis and Cronbach's Coefficient Alpha (www.ats.ucla.ed/stat/SAS/notes2).

Results

Descriptive and inferential statistics were used to analyse the data. The results will be presented in the form of a table and narratively. Reliability was computed by taking several measurements on the same subjects, the Cronbach's Alpha values for individual dimensions were high and a reliability coefficient of 0.70 or higher is considered as "acceptable" (www.ats.ucla.ed/stat/SAS/notes 2). As far as the PMS dimensions are concerned, current expectations for the PMS (Alpha = 0.834) and current perceptions of the PMS impact on effectiveness (Alpha = 0.907). The overall reliability score of Alpha = 0.8715 indicates a high degree of acceptable, consistent scoring for the different categories of this study.

Descriptive statistics

The respondents were required to respond to the terms of the leading statements of the key dimensions of the study using a 1 to 5 Likert scale.

The study findings indicate that the mean score values indicate that employees have different views on the sub-dimensions of the PMS, which is in descending level based on mean scores, which are as follows:

- Current perceptions on the PMS impact on effectiveness (Mean = 4.0694).
- Current expectations for the PMS (Mean = 3.9204).

The mean score values displayed in Table 1 reflect that on a scale from 1 to 5, the respondents were between 4.0694 and 3.9204. This indicates that a high proportion of employees ranged from agree to undecided on statements relating to each dimension. These averages reflect the current status quo at the university concerned as there are transformational and cultural changes taking place, as well as the fear of the unknown as the PMS is regarded as a threat more especially to academics in terms of their freedom and autonomy.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics – key dimensions of PMS

Statistic	Current expectations for the PMS	Current perceptions on the PMS impact on effectiveness
Mean	3.9204	4.0694
Median	4.0000	4.1250
Standard. Deviation	.63552	.69025
Variance	.404	.476
Minimum	2.00	1.00
Maximum	5.00	5.00

Inferential statistics

Inferential statistics were computed to make decisions with regard to the hypothesis of the study.

Hypothesis 1: There is a significant difference in the perceptions of employees varying in the impact of PMS on effectiveness regarding th other dimension (current expectations for the PMS) at the 1% level of significant. Hence, alternative hypothesis may be rejected.

Hypothesis 2: There is a significant intercorrelations in the perceptions of employees varying in the PMS expactations, clarifications and feedback regarding the other dimension of the study (current perceptions on the PMS impact on effectiveness).

The p-value of 0.000 is less than the level of significance of 0.05. This implies that there is a statistically significant difference between the number of respondents who agreed with the statement and those who disagreed.

Current expectations of the PMS

A frequency analysis was conducted and the findings of the study revealed that 34.3% of the respondents disagreed and 21.3% were undecided that PMS is needed within the university concerned. There was a disproportionately high percentage of 36% amongst the academics, of whom disagreed and 18% of whom were undecided about the need for the PMS, which strongly contradicts the 34% of the administration staff who disagreed, 18% who were undecided and 48% who agreed. Almost 60% of senior management were undecided that the system is needed in this institution and 40% agreed. The study results show that 55% of employees with degrees and 49% with postgraduate qualifications agreed that PMS is needed, compared to 25% with matriculation who disagreed and 50% who were undecided. Meanwhile, 6.5% of respondents disagreed and 25.0% were undecided that performance plans will be aligned to the university objectives. It is also noted that 74.1% of respondents have a definite view regarding the question of whether PMS will further and support organisational culture change, while 5.6% disagreed and 20.4% were undecided that PMS will improve interpersonal relations. With regard to non-monetary rewards, 11.1% disagreed and 27.8% were undecided that the system will provide this type of reward. However, 72% of the academics agreed that PMS will provide non-monetary rewards, compared to the 58% of the administration staff.

Current perceptions of the PMS's impact on effectiveness

Under the ambit of the current perceptions of the impact of the PMS on effectiveness, a frequency analysis was undertaken, showing that 7.4% of respondents disagreed and 25.0% were undecided that PMS expectations will be clarified and individual performance feedback will be based on mutual understanding. Whereas, 10.2% disagreed and 24.4% were undecided that there would be an open dialogue between evaluators and those evaluated. On the other hand, 64% of the administration staff agreed that there would be an open dialogue between evaluators and those evaluated compared to 46% of academic support staff who agreed. Furthermore, 7.4% of the respondents disagreed and 21.3% were undecided that line managers will provide guidance. A total of 16.7% of respondents were undecided that employees will be measured according to the functions as stated in their job descriptions.

Discussion

Having reviewed the literature in the previous sections of this article, and statistically presented and analysed the findings of the perception study on the PMS within the university concerned, a discourse is essential to determine the correlation between the literature and research findings. The descriptive statistical results show an average mean value of 4, indicating that there is a need for consideration and improvement for the dimensions of PMS. This in turn reflects negatively to each of the dimensions of the employee readiness survey on the PMS within the university concerned. Such discrepancies require strategic and change management interventions to convert employees who are undecided to be the ambassadors of the PMS throughout its phases. The high proportion of respondents who either disagreed or were undecided means that there is a need for an improvement plan focusing on communication and change management. There is a general tendency of agreement with the statements that constitute this sub-dimension. The average disagreement score is 17% and the disproportionately high percentage (55.6%) of the respondents who were undecided requires a serious investigation into the respondents's uncertainty about the need for the PMS at the university concerned.

Current expectations for the PMS

Even though there is not much conclusive or empirical evidence on resistance to the application of PMS to institutions of higher learning, such perceptions may emanate from the previous failed initiatives of PMS projects at the well established and well resourced universities, as well as poor knowledge and understanding of the PMS's impact and benefits to organisations. The observations in this study are reminiscent of studies by Cameron & Quin (1999) and Rose, Kumar & Ling (2008), who examine the positive relationship between good organisational culture and performance.

The high percentage of academics who disagreed that there is a need for PMS at the university concerned reflects the dissatisfaction level of this specific group, who often complain about being overloaded and who may also perceive the PMS as potentially increasing their workload. Gillespie *et al*. (2001) concur with this finding, suggesting that contributing factors to the rise in workload include a decline in staff numbers, an increase in student numbers, the changing nature of students, and unrealistic deadlines. Since at the university concerned there are no agreed upon workload norms and agreements to determine the level of the workload, another way of ensuring fair and equitable norms is through the implementation of the PMS. Furthermore, the disproportionately high percentage of the respondents who possess matriculation who disagreed and were undecided about the latter sub-dimension is a reflection of semi-literate employees who lack understanding and knowledge of the PMS in general and its benefits as highlighted in the literature above. This finding is in agreement with Mweemba & Malan's (2009: 8) assertion that the role of education should be emphasized in organisations where employees' basic education is at a lower level. Furthermore, the higher percentage of senior management who were both undecided and who also disagreed that there is a need for PMS at this institution contradicts a study conducted by Bernthal, Rogers & Smith (2003) which states that effective PMSs are characterised by the involvement of senior management.

The literature has reflected various types of perfomance rewards which are both monetary and non-monetary, whilst the findings of this study reveal that 27.8% of the respondents were undecided with regard to non-monetary rewards. Different authors and successful organisations have learnt that money is not the only compensation strategy to fulfil the needs of employees (see Harte, 1995: 8; Hinkin & Schriesheim, 2004 and Scott-Ladd, Travaglione & Marshall, 2006: 406). The fact that 44% of

respondents agreed that PMS is needed shows that there was a difference of only 10% between the number of respondents who disagreed than those who agreed. However, an average of the current expectations for the PMS, shows that there is a general tendency of agreement with the statements that constitute this category. On average, 71% of the respondents agreed with the latter dimensions. Hence, the average disagreement score was 17%.

Current perceptions of the PMS's impact on effectiveness

The mean scores were calculated on the perceptions of employees on the PMS's impact on effectiveness, resulting in a mean score value of 4 for this dimension. This dimension indicates a high mean score value which shows that the respondents are in favour of the impact of the PMS on effectiveness. Thus, this study supports the findings of Edward (2003: 3) that performance effectiveness increases when there is ongoing feedback. Such findings have been confirmed by the present research findings indicating that 67.6% agreed with this sub-dimension even though there is a high percentage of respondents who were undecided, which leaves significant room for improvement.

This study produced certain findings which were not consistent with previous studies. These include the highly disproportionate 65.7% of respondents who agreed that there would be an open dialogue between evaluators and those evaluated. On the other hand, the high percentage of 24% of the respondents who were undecided requires further consideration and attention to building trust by ensuring the impartiality and transparency of this system.

Futhermore, 71.3% agreed on the role the line managers will play during the duration of the project, which confirms the findings of authors such as Armstrong (2001: 191), who discussed the role to be played by managers in the PMS process. Much room of improvement is indicated for the sub-dimension that employees will be measured against job descriptions, because, while 78.7% agreed, the fact that 16.7% were undecided and 4.6% disagreed raises serious concerns which are confirmed by Fullan & Scott (2009: 37).

Due to the fact that there is paucity of published literature on the perceptions of employees in the universities on the employees expectations and the impact of PMS on effectiveness. This study could enlighten human resourcces managers to be prepared when planning and implementing the PMS and to customise it in such a way that it mitigates any aforesaid negative perceptions and uncertainty which might transpire at any stage of the system.

Recommendations

Various authors have acknowledged that it is impossible to have a single intergrated PMS that can accomodate all type of organisations. However, it is possible that, even under the diverse circumstances presented above, certain principles, as recommended below, do indeed prevail:

- The university should devise a customised PMS including policy and procedures that accomodates all job categories.
- The line managers at the university concerned should be trained in the use of the entire PMS in order to provide ongoing feedback to the rated employees with development plans to those who are not achieving to minimum standards.
- The university should improve organisational culture through organisational development interventions, including change management coupled with trainings to all employees and put more emphasis on the academics and semi-skilled in order to enable the system to be implemented smoothly.
- The university should implement both financial and non-financial reward systems which would attract, motivate and retain quality employees.
- Employees key performance management areas (KPAs) should emanate from the departmental strategic plans which are also aligned to the approved university strategic plan.

Conclusion

This study argues that PMS is one of the tools instrumental in improving organisational effectiveness associated with equal pay for equal value, promote accountability, collegiality and improve the

competencies of employees. It seems, though, that poor consultation with key stakeholders, poor and lack of shared understanding of the system, unequal workload distribution and rewards, unrealistic objectives, absence of lobbying and advocacy strategies and unaccustomised system to the institution, perpetuate the failure of the system, especially in South African universities.

This study concludes that in order to implement a developmental and all-inclusive PMS, a flexible PMS need to be designed in order to accomodate all employees at different job and education levels. Furthermore, this article recommends that in order for the PMS to improve effectiveness amongst employees, well crafted departmental strategic plans aligned to the organisational strategy, and that roles and responsibilities as well as job descriptions need to be clearly defined and in place, thus responding effectively to the departmental and university objectives.

A noteworthy finding of this study is that the majority of the respondents either disagreed or were undecided about the need of the PMS, which creates a never-ending search for the factors underpinning their perceptions. The final point made in this study is the role that should be played by line managers, which is crucial since the responses indicate a perception of poor employee-employer relationships emanating from a lack of trust. This article contributes to the discussion of PMS strategies and models that should be taken into consideration by universities in planning and implementing PMS. In addition, the main limitation of this study is the fact that it only focussed on the quantitative research design, hence, future research can be intertwine both quantitative and qualitative for triangulation purposes which could yield reliable findings. Furthermore, future research is essential on the academics and to semi-literate employees with the view to establish a customised PMS that could accomodate their levels of reasoning and nature of work.

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