

**Performance Management Systems and Multinational Enterprises: Where
We Are and Where We Should Go**

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Introduction

Managing employee performance is one the most critical HRM functions in any organization. This function, which includes performance appraisal at its core, encompasses all the activities in which an organization engages as it attempts to improve employee performance, with the ultimate goal of improving firm level performance. Therefore, despite the criticism of performance appraisal and performance management (cf., Cancialosi, 2016; but also see Goler, Gale, & Grant, 2016), it is not surprising that the vast majority of firms, globally, engage in some type of formal performance appraisal, and also exert effort to manage employee performance beyond just appraisals (see reviews and discussions by DeNisi & Murphy, 2017; Murphy, Cleveland and Hanscom, 2018; Murphy, 2020).

In this article, we discuss four distinct, but somewhat related challenges facing MNEs relative to performance appraisal and management. Two of these are challenges to performance appraisal and performance management systems in organizations of all types, and two are unique to MNEs. First, there are reasons to question, or at least to be unsure about the entire premise of performance management. It is disappointing, and somewhat shocking to realize that we simply do not know whether performance *can* be managed. That is, we have a wide range of tools and techniques that come together under the heading of performance management, but we are still unsure whether, if we do everything right in evaluating and managing performance, individual job performance and (more critically) organizational effectiveness will improve and increase (DeNisi & Smith, 2014; DeNisi & Murphy, 2017; Murphy, Cleveland & Hanscom, 2018; Iqbal, Budhwar, Akbar, & Shah, 2019; Varma & Budhwar, 2020).

Second, assuming that performance *can* be managed, it is far from clear what is the best mix of approaches and interventions to achieve this (Iqbal, Akbar, & Budhwar, 2015). Here, the challenge primarily takes the form of trying to balance best practices for overall management of human resources, and these are likely to vary across organizations. Third, there is the challenge of balancing the need for consistency vs. accommodation. Different countries have different cultures, norms, legal systems and economic environments, and it is often advantageous, and sometimes necessary to adapt human resource systems to local preferences and needs (Gunnigle, Murphy, Cleveland, Heraty, & Morley, 2002; DeNisi, Varma, & Budhwar, 2008; Kennie & Swart, 2020).

The fourth challenge, which is particularly relevant to MNEs is a function of the unique workforce in many of these organizations, which often includes a mix of a native and an expatriate work force. MNEs often find it necessary and/or advantageous to send members on international assignments in their various divisions, a strategy that can be beneficial for both the organization and the individuals who receive these assignments. Expatriates serve many important functions within MNEs, but these employees and the organizations that employ them face many unique challenges, one of which involves determining MNEs can appraise and manage the performance of employees who are working at remote locations, working in different environments, and serving a variety of needs for the MNE (Tung & Varma, 2008; Varma & Tung, 2020).

Managing Performance Globally: What Have We Learned

Although much of the research on performance appraisal has been done without much concern for context (such as national culture), there are some things we definitely have learned about appraisals in general. One lesson we can draw from over one hundred years of appraisal

research is that we often seem to mis-direct our time and effort in performance appraisal and performance management systems. It may well be the case that there are some instruments which are so poorly designed that they interfere with the appraisal process, but there is not any single rating instrument format that has emerged as being clearly better than the alternatives (cf. DeNisi & Murphy, 2017).

We have also learned that the criteria used to evaluate performance appraisals are often deficient. For decades, we relied on measures of so-called “rating errors”, despite clear evidence that these measures are not an effective way of evaluating appraisal systems, as many of them are not really errors at all (Murphy & Balzer, 1989). We have learned that investments in rater training don’t pay off, with the possible exception what is known as “frame-of-reference training”, which offers promise (cf., Pulakos, 1984). On the other hand, we have learned that research on several aspects of performance appraisal and performance management *does* appear to have clear relevance in organizations. We have learned that ratee reactions to appraisals are important (e.g., Taylor et al., 1995; 1998) as well as the role of contextual performance (Borman & Motowidlo, 1993), and we have learned about the importance of rater motivation to provide fair and accurate ratings and feedback for the effectiveness of any system (Murphy et al., 2018). But, perhaps, most importantly, we have learned that context DOES matter.

We have learned somewhat less when it comes to performance management. Although recent work points to the need to examine the entire performance management process (Sleicher et al., 2019), in practice, research has focused on individual aspects of performance management such as goal setting or feedback rather than on the process, and there is little we can definitely state about how performance management might actually work, except to suggest that it may focus more on motivation than any other factor (DeNisi & Pritchard, 2006).

Unique Challenges Faced by MNEs

Bartlett and Ghosal (1998) identified four basic strategies that MNCs might employ, each of which suggests potentially distinct methods of dealing with the challenge of evaluating and managing the performance of MNEs.

A global strategy was defined as one where everything is centralized, and policies and practices flow from the corporate HQ to the subsidiaries. This is the simplest strategy since it implied that the same performance appraisal and performance management programs will be implemented across the organization. A multidomestic strategy is one which emphasizes local responsiveness and decision making is decentralized. In some ways, this is the obverse of the global strategy, and it implies that each unit in the organization might need to develop its own methods for evaluating and managing performance. An international strategy also involves transferring policies, practices and expertise from the HQ to the subsidiaries, but, in this case, issues beyond core strategic decision can be customized according to the subsidiary needs. Finally, a transnational strategy involves balancing the benefits of centralization (i.e., cost reduction), with the flexibility and local control that is needed for local responsiveness.

One of the more obvious differences in context facing an MNE is the different cultures existing the countries where they do business. Although there are several models of culture and cultural differences, the dimensions proposed by Hofstede have clearly dominated the management research (e.g., Hofstede, 1980; 2001; Hofstede et al., 2010). This work suggests that cultures and work-related values can be understood in terms of Power Distance, Individualism-Collectivism, Masculinity-Femininity, and Uncertainty Avoidance, Long Term vs. Short Term Orientation, and Indulgence vs. Restraint. Research on performance appraisal and culture has found that cultural dimensions are related to such factors as the presence of formal

systems (e.g., Peretz & Fried, 2012); who conducts an evaluation (e.g., the acceptance of multi-source ratings; Shipper, Hoffman, & Rotondo, 2007); and purpose for the appraisal (e.g., development vs. decision making; Chiang & Birtch, 2010). Other research has found that culture is related to the likelihood that ratings will tend to be low or high (i.e., leniency bias vs. modesty bias; e.g., Farh, Dobbins & Cheng, 1991); the importance of “liking” or affect (e.g., Hu, Hsu, Lee, & Chu, 2007; Varma, Pichler & Srinivas, 2005; Varma, et al., 2016); and the emphasis placed on different rating dimensions (e.g., Ployhart et al., 2003). Clearly, implementing the same appraisal systems across countries with different cultures may cause problems.

Next, feedback is critical to performance management systems, but there are reasons to question the effectiveness of feedback, at least in western settings (e.g., Kluger & DeNisi, 1998). Our understanding of the effectiveness of feedback in other cultures is fragmentary, although there is research to suggest that feedback is less likely to be accepted in cultures high on power distance and high on collectivism (e.g., Toegel & Conger, 2003; Shipper et al., 2007). In addition, authors such as Brewster (1995) have argued that HR management systems developed in the U.S. may not apply in Europe because of the stronger regulatory pressures there (also see Budhwar, Varma & Patel, 2016). Regulatory pressures differ not only in terms of their strength, but also in terms of the specific problems they seek to address. For example, performance management systems in the U.S. have been developed under pressure from the Civil Rights Act, which is concerned with potential discrimination against defined groups of employees.

Thus, there is a reasonable body of research to suggest that countries with different cultures, different legal systems and different economic systems may differ in the ways in which they assess and manage performance. Thus, an important question is whether or not systems developed in one set of countries CAN be used in other cultures. Because of the dominance of

US-based MNEs in many sectors, this often boils down to a question of whether U.S. based models of management, and especially HR management can transfer successfully to other countries (cf. Brewster & Suutari, 2005).

There continue to be serious debates about whether HR systems are converging across the world or diverging (cf. Brewster & Mayrhofer, 2019; Budhwar, et al., 2019; Morley, 2004). Some scholars (Brewster et al., 2008; Hauff, Guerci, Dul, & van Rhee, 2021; Ralston, 2008) have argued that neither trend is dominated, but, rather, there is the emergence of what has been termed “hybridization” which involves taking western policies and plans and adapting them to the needs of other cultures, while still retaining the essential aspects of those practices (see also Budhwar et al., 2016). Our review of research suggests that there is no ready answer to this question, and that MNEs will continue to need to make hard decisions about how to best balance centralization vs. accommodation in the design and implementation of performance appraisal and performance management systems.

Finally, we come to the special challenges related to managing an expatriate workforce (see, e.g., Tung & Varma, 2008; Varma & Tung, 2020). Appraising and managing the performance of these employees pose unique challenges. First, the definition of performance, and the related problem of how to determine if expatriate assignments are successful. Some researchers have argued that expatriate success should be defined in terms of adjustment to the new environment (e.g., Black et al., 1991). Adjustment is probably a necessary but not sufficient condition for success (DeNisi & Sonesh, 2016). Still others have argued that success and performance, should be assessed as a function of the purpose for which the assignment was made (e.g., Harking, Brown, & Harzing, 2004), but there are typically a number of such purposes and evaluating success across a number of roles can be especially difficult. Next, it has been argued

that the performance of expatriates should be assessed the same as in any domestic operation (Arthur & Bennett, 1997), but this suggestion runs the risk of ignoring why individuals are sent on expatriate assignments in the first place. It is often assumed that expatriate assignments are all about the transfer of knowledge and that performance should be assessed relative to the amount and direction of knowledge transfer (DeNisi & Sonesh, 2016; Minbaeva et al., 2003; Minbaeva, 2005). This transfer of knowledge might be from the HQ to the subsidiary but might also (or even simultaneously) flow in the opposite direction involving what has been termed “reverse knowledge transfer” (e.g., Ambos, Ambos, & Schlegelmilch, 2006; Kong, Ciabuschi, & Martin., 2018).

Surprisingly, only few scholars (e.g., Harrison & Shaffer, 2005) have actually discussed the role of “contextual performance” which is related to organizational citizenship behavior (cf., Podsakoff et al., 2000) in MNEs. The literature on performance appraisal has suggested that contextual performance is extremely important for team and firm performance, and that contextual performance may actually influence ratings of task performance as well (Borman & Motowidlo, 1993; Murphy et al., 2018). Thus, MNEs need to assess how important non-task related performance is for managers in different locations, and especially for expatriate managers. This problem is complicated by the fact that there is some research (Farh et al., 1997; 2004) to suggest that, although citizenship behaviors are valued by both Eastern and Western cultures, the definitions of which specific behaviors constitute citizenship behavior vary across cultures.

As we noted earlier, the rating scale is almost certainly not the most important determinant of effective appraisals (DeNisi & Murphy, 2018), but there are questions around whether to assess traits, behaviors or outcomes, regardless of the rating scale format. In fact,

even if there is agreement on the definition of performance, scholars have noted that, given a set of performance dimensions, managers from different cultures are likely to place a priority on different sets of dimensions (Murphy et al., 2018). Additionally, identifying rating sources across nations, and especially for expatriates also poses challenges for MNEs. For example, collectivist cultures may have more problem with peer evaluations (e.g., Enterkin & Chung, 2001; Murphy et al., 2018), and cultures high in power distance may have issues with upward appraisals (e.g., Adsit et al., 1997). Therefore, the likely success of using some type of 360 degree or multi-source appraisal system seems low in certain cultures. In addition, it has been suggested that HCNs in more developed countries may resent the special treatment and perks given to expatriates and so could actually work against their success (Toh & DeNisi, 2003; 2005).

In addition, managing the performance of expatriates also involves problems of repatriation and retention. However, research on repatriation (Baruch et al., 2016; Knocke & Schuster, 2017; Kraimer et al., 2016) has shown that most MNEs do not consider repatriation as part of the total overseas assignment picture when formulating strategy. As a result, repatriation is often an after-thought and so is often unsuccessful.

Where Do We Go from Here?

It seems clear that there are many challenges facing MNEs relative to appraising and managing performance. We know that culture (and context) matter, so that one size almost never fits all (DeNisi et al., 2008), but MNEs must balance this recognition with the need to treat all employee fairly and consistently. Unfortunately, there is little research to guide them in how to accomplish this balancing act. There are, as noted, studies indicating that different types of systems exist in countries with different cultures, and this provides some information about

preferences. But we do not know the full implications of these differences. It is widely believed that which different countries with different cultures and economic and political systems will differ in the performance appraisal and performance management practices they prefer and that they find acceptable, but surveys of actual organizational practices suggest that the picture is not so clean cut (Gorman, Meriac, Roch, Ray & Gamble, 2017; Mercer, 2013). Performance management and performance appraisal systems do differ from country to country, but the differences are quantitative (i.e., higher or lower probabilities of including specific features), not qualitative. Hofstede (2001), in the second edition of his classic book on national cultures, provided more detailed information about a study that had been conducted on organizational cultures. His observation was that “whereas national cultures differed primarily in their values, organizational cultures turned out to differ mainly in their practices” (p. 373).

The issue then, when it comes to performance appraisal and management systems, which force is stronger. Do the national cultural values invalidate the use of certain practices, or can the organizational cultures encourage or discourage particular practices, even in the face of strong national cultures? Of course, the notion of hybridization, discussed earlier, suggests a third possibility where general practices and policies are modified according to local cultures. Hofstede (2001) also relates an anecdote (p. 375) of how a policy that stated that salary increases had to be initiated by a direct superior was interpreted differently in France versus the U.S., even though the policy itself was the same in the two countries. It is unlikely that any single study or paper will be able to answer this question definitively, but it is clear that more research is needed. MNEs will continue to struggle to balance the need to have strong HR systems with the recognition that any such systems may not be effective in all cultures. As noted, there is some suggestion that expatriate success should be defined in terms of knowledge transfer – both

knowledge transferred from the expatriate as well as knowledge transferred to the expatriate. But there has been little research on exactly how to assess that knowledge transfer, including evaluations of the ways the expatriate transfers any knowledge she or he has obtained back to the HQ operations. All of this suggests we need a process-oriented approach to defining success and thus, for managing performance. We cannot identify ways of helping expatriates meet corporate goals unless we know exactly what those goals are.

Finally, we need further research recognizing the role of HCNs in the entire performance appraisal and management process. These local employees can provide important help and aid in socialization (e.g., Toh & DeNisi, 2007), and are also involved in the knowledge transfer process. Therefore, it seems reasonable that they should be part of the process. Should they serve as raters for performance appraisal? Should they be trained on how to manage expatriate performance since they work with those expatriates on a continuing basis?

Conclusion

In the above sections, we have presented only a few of the pressing questions that still need to be addressed relative to the challenges facing MNEs. Appraising and managing performance of employees operating in remote locations, often with vastly different cultures, and determining how to best use these employees to serve corporate strategic goals are problems that defy simple solutions. Thankfully, research forums such as the one that follows help shed some light on how to deal with these problems, though we clearly need many more such forums. In this special issue, we have included include seven outstanding articles that address some of the issues raised by us. We are confident that these articles will spur further research on performance management related issues in MNEs.

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