PERFORMANCE APPRAISAL PROCESS IN LIBYAN PUBLIC ORGANISATIONS: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to explore the underlying practices of the performance appraisal system (PAS) in the Libyan public sector. In doing so, the study illuminates the influence of cultural practices on the PA system. Looking from an interpretive lens, it explores those factors that help Libyan managers to make judgments about their employees' performance. In addition, it explores how company managers perceive the meaning of their work before, during and after the 2011 uprising in Libya (17 of February revolution). This study provides empirical insights of 30 managers at the Ahlia Cement Company (ACC). A qualitative approach was employed; data was gathered through semi-structured interviews, documentation and direct observation, and thematic analysis was used in analysing the collected data. The findings reveal employees were not very clear about the aims of their PA system, and the Libyan culture plays a significant role in the implementation of management practices in organizations, including performance appraisal, as managers take their decisions based on their relationships with their employees, whether friendship or family related. The study uncovers a sharp contrast between that two periods – the period of uprising and the period after the uprising.

Key words: Appraisal challenges, problems, perception, performance appraisal, Libya

Introduction

Performance appraisal is an important practice of HRM and a practice that can directly help organisations to achieve their objectives. It is considered as one of the essential and significant needs in organizations, as it helps businesses to understand their employees' level of performance and whether it has improved or not (Jafari et al., 2009). Several human resource scholars suggest that the efforts of employees can determine the survival and success of organisations (Ahmad and |Ali, 2004). Performance appraisal is a methodical evaluation of staff performance compared to organisational performance standards. It includes the appraising and development of the performance of employees. Work standards are included in the process in order to assess the real work performance of employees compared to those standards and provide them with feedback, putting in mind their motivation to perform effectively. Therefore, an efficient PA requires evaluating the current levels of performance and enhancing strengths, discovering weaknesses, and providing feedback to the staff as well as the organisation, in order to have better performance in the future (Bratton and Gold, 2007)

According to Landy and Farr (1983) PA is one of the HRM tools that has received interest for more than seventy years; it is a formal practice that evaluates employees' performance. In this regard, it refers to the whole process, starting with the foundation standards of performance, appraising appraisers' behaviours during the period of appraisal, determination of performance evaluation and communication of ratings to the appraises. It includes a methodically developed data handling system designed to facilitate managerial control by which the employees are given feedback on how efficiently they are working and what they should do differently (Wilson, 2002) Performance appraisal is part of the overall management process and is considered as a process of making judgements about an employee's performance as a basis for effective and objective personnel decisions (Jafari et al. 2009). Therefore, the process is an activity planned to arrive at individual and organisational effectiveness. Thus, it is a designed official communication between an employee and a manager that takes the form of a regular interview (once or twice a year) in which the job performance of the employee is methodically assessed and discussed, with the aim of identifying strengths and weaknesses and providing chances for future development and improvement

(Zheng et al., 2012). Usually PA is designed by the function of human resources (HR department) and requires that supervisors or line managers assess their employees' work performance regularly 'once, twice or three times a year' (Hall et al., 1998). Even though the use of this practice has grown in both private and public organisations, very little was found in the literature concerning the insights and perceptions of people working in organisations operating in the developing countries and in the Middle East. The purpose of this research was to explore and generate new insights about appraisal practice in the Libyan industry organisations as well as to identify empirically how participants' experience compares to traditional mainstream conceptualisations and functions of performance appraisal.

Literature review

Performance Appraisal in Perspective

As indicated earlier, performance appraisal is one of the most sensitive business activities, as it concerns the evaluation of a person's input and capability. It was suggested that PA can contribute to efficient human resource management, and ultimately organisational performance, since assessment is seen as any ruling or judgement that impacts on the employee's position in terms of several human resource choices, such as firing, promoting, demoting, transferring, and administering salary and employee development (Zhang and Lovegrove, 2009). As such, PA practices are considered one of the primary HR systems, and they are comprehensively discussed research in the management literature. For example, Levy and Williams (2004 offer broad reviews of the PA literature. Main areas of the contribution in professional journals include information processes, rating errors, and reactions to PA, along with training appraisers, appraisal outcomes and group dynamics. Other research, for example, analyses the outcomes of performance appraisal regarding workers' job satisfaction, intention to leave work and performance (Poon, 2004). However, the related practical research typically investigates a small number of topics (Callahan et al., 2003; Grund and Sliwka, 2009).

The volume of research on PA is massive. Nonetheless, the limitation of much of this study for the development of the understanding of PA is generally recognized (Lathan and Lee, 1986; Murphy and Cleveland, 1991). Much of the early research considered performance evaluation as tests, causing a focus on validity, dependability and freedom from prejudice. The emphasis was chiefly on the part played by the appraiser and the nature of the appraisal measures. For instance, scholars studied the influence of psychologically anchored rating scales or graphic rating scales and acknowledged a number of collective mistakes made by appraisers, like the halo effect, which is the tendency to give a good rating for all work responsibilities on the basis of excellent performance in a single job or task; central tendency, which can rate all employees near the centre of a scale regardless of real performance; and recency effects, which refer to assigning too much focus to recent performance (Brown and Heywood, 2005).

Before the 1980s, most empirical and theoretical researches concentrated on developing the psychometric characteristics of the appraisal method in order to decrease the bias inbuilt in performance assessments (Feldman, 1981). During the 1960s and 1970s, for example, research focused on rating scale format and development with development of some new formats such as the Behaviour Observation Scale (BOS), the Behaviourally Anchored Rating Scale (BARS) and the Mixed Standard Scale. Other related research areas included appraisers training to decrease appraisal biases and raise observational skills and evolving PA systems. Study investigating the efficiency of the diverse rating scale formats pointed out that appraisals were not influenced by adjustments in the format of rating scale (Walsh, 2003).

Landy and Farr (1980) published one of the widest reviews of performance appraisal research, during three decades (1950 to 1980). They proposed a graphic presentation consisting of five components of performance appraisal research areas (Dhiman and Singh, 2007). The review of Landy and Farr was based on five categories: 1) roles, such as appraiser's characteristics, appraisees' characteristics and type of appraisal etc., 2) context, such as the goal of rating and type of organization, 3) vehicle, such as rating scales and rating formats, 4) rating process, such as the effect of managerial constraints on appraisal, the effects of job characteristics on ratings, the effects of appraiser training on ratings and 5) results, such as those that deal with raw and transformed performance information.

Based on the above review, Landy and Farr indicated that even though studies of different areas had been conducted, much emphasis had been put on developing rating scales and minimising rating errors or biases. However, little emphasis had been on understanding how the evaluators make the ultimate judgments. In particular, Landy and Farr

claimed that research on how appraisers observe, encode, store and record performance information had been largely ignored. They proposed future research should put heavier emphasis on such concerns. This is in line with the questions and the main idea of this research, which investigates the factors used by Libyan managers to make judgments about their employees' performance.

Landy and Farr's (1980) review resulted in a shift in the focus of research interests in performance appraisal. The review of performance appraisal research in the 1980s by Ilgen et al. (1993) noted the following changes of research focus. Before the 1980s, the majority of research was directed toward evolving better rating scales. As a result of the proposals by Landy and Farr (1980), the focus of research interest moved to understanding the appraiser as a decision-maker in the appraisal process. Research put the appraisal context into focus, and highlighted the need for bringing together numerous aspects of assessment research; for example, study of formats, scales, features and traits of appraisee and assessor (Dhiman and Singh, 2007). Ilgen et al. (1993) classified the main topic areas addressed in literature over that time into four, categories: 1) characteristics of the appraisal setting within which the rating occurs, 2) appraiser attributes such as race and cognitive style, 3) the effects of appraisee characteristics such as race and gender, 4) the influence of rating scale on evaluation accuracy. The authors argue that the use of PAs as inputs to the organisational decisions for example, training and promotion, contributed to the spotlight on the accuracy of appraisal as the key to evaluation effectiveness (Wood and Marshall, 2008). During this period, Feldman (1981) shed light on the cognitive processes that an assessor undergoes while conducting appraisal: identifying and looking into the relevant performance data, keeping and arranging data for subsequent access, and recollecting and incorporating pertinent data in a planned manner while going through the evaluation. Experiential evidence exists to back up these procedures; thus improving the appraisal precision and accuracy (Dhiman and Singh, 2007). Also in the 1980s, research on the accuracy of PA and the evolvement of accuracy criteria was popular. Research investigated popular psychometric biases, rating errors, for example, leniency and halo, with the supposition that these implied a scarcity of precision. It was thought that reducing bias increased accuracy. Many scholars, for instance Murphy et al. (1985); Hulin (1982), and Roch (1997), have challenged this idea and argued that evaluation without bias is not essentially more precise. Accuracy research moved from appraiser errors to the gap between appraisal and some standard of performance.

In the 1980s, studies of the performance appraisal process brought several key ideas into the HR practices literature, including attention to the importance of observation in the assessment procedure and how information gained by appraisers is used. Also the investigation in this period assisted to explain some thoughts concerning PA, including the idea that errors of appraisal as usually described were proof of appraisal errors, whereas the research pointed out these might not be consequential inaccuracies (Walsh 2003). Another contribution concerned the use of performance appraisals, the context in which the appraisals took place and how the utilize of such appraisals were impacted the outcomes. Scholars stated that appraisals should be utilized for the objectives recognized by appraisers at the appraisal time (Murphy et al. 1985; (Zedeck and Cascio, 1982).

Ilgen et al. (1993) recognized these contributions; however, they noted that the general influence on the development of PAS had been limited. They also claimed that PA scholars in the earlier period focused on information processing errors and decisions rather than being aware of what supervisors do well (Wood and Marshall 2008). Bretz Jr et al. (1992) and Ali and Al-Kazemi (2007) reviewed performance appraisal research published between 1985 and 1990, and like Ilgon et al. (1993) they noted the domination of research on issues concerning the appraiser's cognitive processing, and the significant interest in appraiser/appraisee characteristics and psychometric issues shown by researchers and scholars. However, they argued that research on aspects such as source of rating, appraiser training, formats, fairness and appraisal uses had been rather limited. Also in this period, scholars identified aspects that suggested a greater chance of effective PAS than if these aspects did not occur. (Mohrman et al., 1989) stated that a successful performance evaluation system has to fit the company needs. They argued that an efficient appraisal system depends on the following key items: 1) appraisal instruments and techniques; 2) the level of harmony between the evaluation system and other organizational aspects; 3) system design; 4) introducing the system appropriately; 5) coaching system users. They argued that one of the very significant elements in efficient PA is obviously determining PAS's aims. Mohrman et al. (1989) describe the complete appraisal system to consist of the following constituents: 1) two sets of PA that deal with direct feedback and long period problems; 2) a resolution concerning who determines performance; 3) determining PA techniques; 4) who will be the appraiser; 5) what technique will be employed to gather performance data; and 6) efficient feedback that is on time and provided by the appropriate appraiser. Assessments should be on time; so that they can match

work features. The PAS in organisations should be supported by senior managers to maintain the essential obligation from mid-level managers (Walsh 2003).

Competent assessments require both expertise and incentive, so that skills are used efficiently. Well-designed assessment forms, alongside well-informed and skilled appraisers, may still not be sufficient for precise evaluations. The responsibilities linked to the creation of performance ratings are various, and frequently hard to achieve within the multifaceted and active milieu of the majority of job settings. According to Wood and Marshall (2008), among the various factors that can weaken a supervisor enthusiasm throughout the process of assessment are weakly appraisal forms, subjective outcomes, shortage of data regarding the employee's performance and concern about appraisees' response to appraisal results.

More recently, the role of organisational context in performance appraisal has received attention. Murphy and Cleveland (1991; 1995) proposed that academics should take into consideration the appraisal context prior to analysing or assessing the success of appraisals or appraisal schemes. Research has indicated that assessments of the attitudinal type may eventually demonstrate to be better measures and interpreters of evaluation strength than traditional psychometric variables such as halo and leniency. A PAS can be good in planning and structuring but in practice still unsuccessful due to opposition or inaccuracy from users. Therefore, the efficiency of an appraisal scheme is mainly contingent on the system users' attitudes (appraisers and appraisees) (Rogers, 1990). Murphy and Cleveland (1995) indicated that inadequate attention has been paid by scholars to the organisational context in which appraisal takes place (Grund and Sliwka 2009). They argued that too much attention has been paid to treating appraisal as an assessment process, instead, they looked at appraisal from an applied social-psychological perspective as a social and communication process. They argued that taking such an approach has the advantage of giving greater attention to the important role of the appraisal process and therefore can be beneficial to the practice of performance appraisal in organisation.

The previous reviews appear to suggest that researchers have appreciated the importance of considering the contextual factors surrounding performance appraisal and have called for studies that take context more critically. Despite the importance of context, according to the review of Levy and Williams (2004) not much research has been carried out with regard to the factors influencing formal performance appraisal schemes. Murphy and Cleveland (1995), for example, emphasised the shortage of research on the associations between environmental factors and evaluation (Grund and Sliwka 2009). Exceptionally, research in 2005 by Brown and Heywood examined Australian data to investigate the factors influencing performance assessment systems, including union coverage and size of the company. However, they employed corporate information; thus they could not consider the impact of employees' individual characteristics, or being in a profession where performance is frequently assessed (Grund and Sliwka 2009).

Whilst the work reviewed above concentrated on PA inputs and processes, another area of research concern has been its outcomes. Performance appraisal has often been thought to be one of the most useful instruments for efficient HRM and performance enhancement, yet in spite of the importance given to the procedure, it is indisputable that there exists general dissatisfaction with the procedure among the users of the system (Sabeen and Mehboob, 2008).

Increasingly, PA has proven to be an integral part of a more tactical style to incorporating HR tasks and corporate strategies and is currently a general term comprising a range of activities through which business groups strive to monitor and appraise employees, enhance their competency, increase their input, and share rewards (Fletcher, 2001). As a result, both practice and theory have progressed from a restricted attention to psychometric and assessing problems to developmental PA. According to Kuvaas (2006) a number of businesses still express discontent with their evaluation systems and Fletcher (2001) suggests this may indicate a lack of effectiveness of performance appraisal as an instrument for encouraging and inspiring employees.

Some research calls into question the success of performance appraisal in offering clear, performance-based feedback to workers, which is supposed to impact on their future input. A meta-analysis, carried out by Kluger and DeNisi (1996) concluded that even though feedback by and large enhances performance, more than one third of the studies claimed that it decreased performance, while similar findings have been conveyed for multi-source feedback. For example, Seifert et al. (2003) studied 14 researches that involved either upward or 360-degree response and

concluded that even though some studies stated that performance had been improved, some did not, while others showed indecisive outcomes (Jawahar, 2010).

A number of theoretical approaches of assessment have stated that workers' response to feedback is likely to decide the degree to which they will use feedback to enhance their input at work (Ilgen et al., 1979) Murphy and Cleveland 1995). While this relation might appear perceptive, it has not been sufficiently evaluated. On the other hand, typical explanations (Ilgen et al., 1979; Taylor et al., 1984) support the idea that workers will respond better when they obtain scores that are high or higher than predicted (Brett and Atwater, 2001) in (Jawahar, 2010). Nonetheless, being dependent only on the degree of assessment to describe affirmative feedback suggests, erroneously that all persons in receipt of the same rating will have similar reactions. Moreover, superiors cannot avoid that fact that they must also offer unwelcome feedback or constructive criticism (Jawahar, 2010).

 A general consensus exists among PA researchers and experts that evaluating reactions to appraisal could be significant. For example, it is often claimed that for PA to have a sure impact on workers' behaviour and their future growth, these members of staff should be subject to a positive assessment feedback. If this is not the case, any evaluation scheme will be condemned to fail miserably. In spite of the fact that PA satisfaction is the most frequently measured form of appraisal outcome (Keeping and Levy, 2000), and while there is wide-ranging research related to factors that play a major role in PA satisfaction or other outcomes (Levy and Williams, 2004), it seems that there exists a lack of practical evidence on why and how satisfaction with PA has such an importance. Levy and Williams (2004) studied PA research and they asked for more field investigation on performance appraisal (Kuvaas, 2006).

The dissatisfaction related to the PA practice could have to do with the supposed injustice of the scheme for the users of the system. For researchers, employee feedback is an effective measure of the effectiveness of the scheme. A very well built and well planned system can fail completely it is not approved by its users. Consequently, workers' perception of fairness is the ultimate measure of the system's positive accomplishment. The effectiveness of the assessment system is also contingent upon the perception of justice connected to it. In addition to that, it is also important that appraisees see that they are being assessed against what they are normally expected to do while on the task. In other words, the assessment tool should obviously measure their performance against their job-associated tasks. The supposed justice of the assessment not only raises the accessibility of the system, but also plays a role in the general job satisfaction level. A number of studies indicate that between 20 to 50 per cent of total job satisfaction is explained by satisfaction with assessment (Sabeen and Mehboob (2008).

Murphy and Cleveland (1991) argue that performance ratings are expected to be perceived by workers as fair and precise when: evaluations are carried out regularly; there is official PASs; appraisers understand their job; appraisees have the right to ask for appeals; dimensions of performance are perceived to be well related; action plans are designed to deal with present weakness; and the organisational environment is supportive and co-operative instead of competitive. Mohrman et al. (1983) proposed that academics need to focus on how PAS is viewed by company workers to get better PA precision. Additionally, they propose that institutions test the use of PA data to decide if the utilizes and tasks lead to a precise PA system. However, extensive organized studies have not been conducted on the assessment of the efficiency of PAS in the organisational context. Assessment of the effectiveness of a PAS is proposed as component of the system implementation and managerial process. Nonetheless, existing empirical studies of the assessment of PAS are inadequate. This might be because of the complexity of the systems involved and difficulty of choosing appropriate assessment criteria. According to Murphy and Cleveland (1991), the success of HR practices including PA has to be appraised. They pointed out that presently existing techniques for assessing PAS pose a number of serious issues for practitioners. Besides, Bernardin et al. (1998) argued that there is lack of research on performance assessment practices.

The large gap that exists between performance appraisal research and practice has been blamed as one of the factors that has contributed to the problems faced by practitioners (Rohani, 2001). Several scholars (Arvey& Murphy, 1998; Banks and Murphy, 1985; Napier and Latham and Lee, 1986; Bretz et al., 1992; Murphy and Cleveland, 1995) indicated that there is a gap between research and practice in relation to performance appraisal. They indicated that this gap was obvious in the late 1980s, when a number of investigations were done in the laboratory and concentrated on separate variables of cognitive processing in assessment and appraisal (Walsh, 2003). Banks and

Murphy (1985) alerted researchers to the increasing gap between their concentration on research and the experts' anticipations, particularly in light of the new mental process theory (Dhiman and Singh, 2007).

The research approaching the problem of evaluators' ability mostly emphasises understanding and explaining rating prejudice and inaccuracies. Studies on rating criteria include efforts to improve precision through development in scales, setups and standard, strength; while at the same time empowering evaluators to carry out a more accurate assessment. In spite of the enormous contribution of both fields of research to enhancing the appraisal technology and procedures, more relevant aspects from the practice viewpoint continue to be ignored. Researchers' emphasis and specialists' expectations in this area have not been compatible. Furthermore, a great deal of the above research is based on laboratory work, thus ignoring the assessment setting as well as the procedure, and also fails to deal with the key problems (Dhiman and Singh, 2007).

The few far-reaching researches on performance assessment (Murphy and Cleveland, 1995; Latham and Mann, 2006) have not approached the central problems of the performance assessment procedure; that performance appraisal is largely affected by a number of pertinent, non-performance issues like the cultural setting (Latham and Mann, 2006); that it does not offer individuals effective performance data or suitable response (Fletcher, 2001); or that performance assessment tools frequently rate the wrong elements (Catano et al., 2007).

Characteristically, appraisal research has been dedicated to appraisal as an evaluation procedure, according to Fletcher (2001) and Levy and Williams (2004), with scholars who are largely concerned about enhancing the precision and relevance of assessment schemes and scales of measurement. A topic that one strand of appraisal research reflects on is the nature of the judgement employed in the assessment, where a distinction is made between absolute styles, where persons are valued in terms of pre-set criteria and comparative styles, in which people are assessed against each other. Theorists contrasting the efficiency of comparative and absolute approaches propose that it is the latter that enjoys greater rationality (Spicer and Ahmed, 2006).

As for contemporary approaches to appraisal, they are more interested in social and mental aspects of the evaluation process (Fletcher, 2001; Levy and Williams, 2004). This strand was developed out of the failure of traditional methods to enhance appraisal effectiveness, and acknowledgement that identifying the feelings of the assessors and the assessed about the process should promote understanding of this process and its difficulties (Spicer and Rusli, 2006).

Based on the literature review of the areas heavily investigated, it comes into view that research on contextual factors has been limited. However, there is evidence that consideration of the proximal factors in appraisal have received considerable attention by scholars. For example, as noted by Landy and Farr (1980), research has been conducted on the purposes of appraisal. However, the evidence showed that as compared to broad research interests, focus on the effects and impacts of distal factors (organisation's environment), especially those of the external environment such as social values, political and legal environment, economy, technology, culture) has been largely ignored. Also it appears that performance appraisal research in the eastern context in general and in Libya in particular has been largely absent. Recognising the need and the importance of research addressing the practice of performance appraisal and effects of contextual factors surrounding it, this study therefore has been done to give a deep understanding of performance appraisal and its process as applied in the ACC in Libya and fill the gap. It seems that the practice of performance appraisal in the Libyan context is still unexplored. Therefore, this area of potential study represents the basis for the present study.

Methodology

The philosophical assumption underlying this research is the belief that participants' perceptions regarding their performance appraisal emanate from their interpretations of their varied appraisal experiences. Therefore, this research is rooted in an interprtivist philosophy which maintains that the social world is mostly what individuals perceive it to be, and that reality is socially constructed as individuals attach meanings to their experience (Narcisse and Harcourt, 2008). This approach is particularly appropriate for this research, because of its potential for providing in-depth insights into the underlying phenomenon.

A qualitative case study strategy was used to obtain a rich and holistic understanding of participants' perceptions regarding their appraisal process and the meaning of work in the Libyan context. According to Patton (2002), the

purpose of a case study is to "gather comprehensive, systematic and in-depth information" about a phenomenon (p. 447). It is argued that the case study represents one of the main research methods that is usually carried out with the interpretivist paradigm. Furthermore, the case study method is suitable when a researcher wants to inductively to explain, explore or describe the phenomenon being studied in its real context (Yuosff, 2008). Also, Yin (2009) recommends a case study method to answer 'how' questions and to understand the contextual conditions in which interviewees act. The qualitative case study strategy is therefore appropriate for this research, because it seeks to explore the underlying practices of the performance appraisal which are relate to the participants' experiences in the Libyan context.

Sample

The senior and line managers of a Libyan owned state organisation (ACC) are the primary unit of analysis, since they all of them were in charge of the appraisal process in the company. All interviewees were employed with the organisation at the time the data were gathered. Participants were selected by using a purposeful qualitative sampling strategy. I interviewed only managers who had worked for the company at least five years, on the basis that those managers would have a comprehensive understanding of the company's appraisal system. Participants of this research were chosen from different activities and educational backgrounds to ensure diversify in working experiences and perceptions.

Initial contact with the company was made via a 'line manager', who informally helped me conduct the needed interviews. However, official permission to gain access to the interviewees was gained. As soon as the first participants agreed to participate, I made contact with them, usually by phone, introducing myself, and the research topic and aims. I also explained what we were going to talk about, to make them comfortable and familiar with the topics. Based on the argument that interview locations are important (Adler and Adler, 2003), I attempted to interview them at their offices in order to give them more power. However, some of them refused, because their time was quite limited at work and they could not come in the evening, so interviews were conducted in cafes and houses. Participants had the opportunity to choose the location of the interviews. A copy of the interview questions were sent to each interviewee before the agreed interview date to give interviewees time to familiarize themselves with interview questions. Each interviewee was asked about the process of performance appraisal in the company as well as about the meaning of his work before, during and after the Libyan uprising in February 2011.

Company characteristics

According to the Ahlia-Cement-Company (2009), the ACC is the oldest cement company in Libya; it was founded in 1965 under the name of the National Cement and Building Materials. In 1988 the company was formed as a state-owned company. ACC is headquartered in Alkoms City and it has a total number of seven plants in four different locations. Four factories are producing cement, one factory is producing soft gypsum, one factory is a concrete mixer and one produces cement and soft gypsum bags. The company has above a thousand employees, and the total annual sales volume is above US $ 100 million. ACC is dispersed among four cities covering the western and middle regions of the country. Approximately 65% of the total Libyan people are served by the case study company. The company has contributed effectively in supporting the Libyan economy. According to the Libyan Ministry of Industry, it is considered as one of the best five companies in Libya. Because of its significance, cement manufacturing in Libya has been made a high priority for development with up to date manufacturing technologies, and efficient management requiring modern administrative skills.

The company's performance appraisal system relies on a basic graphic rating scale system. It was designed to offer employees with annual performance feedback, serve as a source for taking some administrative decisions such as determining salaries and promotions, and check whether company goals have been achieved or not.

In this company immediate supervisors carry out the appraisal process. Performance appraisals for all company workers are done once year (in December). Performance criteria are established by the Libyan Ministry of Industry. Supervisors observe employees' performance and offer ongoing practical feedback over the period appraisal. All workers are appraised on seven characteristics: the quality and quantity of their work, job knowledge, responsibility, contact with colleagues and public, dependability, cooperation level and judgement. At the end of the year, managers evaluate employees' performance against the job standards and their behaviours in the workplace. Only

poor performers receive appraisal feedback; those employees have the right to discuss their results with their supervisors and they can appeal if they feel their feedback is not fair.

Data collection

The data collection method of this research was from two main sources: semi-structured interviews which are considered as one of the most significant data sources in case studies, and documents analysis like appraisal reports and any document related to the investigation that offer particular information which can support spoken accounts.

 All the interviews were face to face recorded interviews. The conducted interviews required on average between 50 minutes and one hour; all of them were recorded and were then transcribed verbatim to paper format. All of the interviews were done in Arabic then translated into English by me, and reviewed by a recognised translation service agency. The use of open-ended questions provided opportunities for participants to articulate their perceptions regarding the process of performance appraisal.

Data analysis

Braun and Clarke (2006: 6) defined thematic analysis as "a method for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data. It minimally organises and describes your data set in (rich) detail. However, it also often goes further than this, and interprets various aspects of the research topic". Other writers have defied thematic analysis as an effective tool in anglicising qualitative data, for instance, Gibbs (2007) defined thematic analysis as an effective tool for analysing qualitative data inductively.

The processes of analysing my data relied on thematic analysis, I started with reducing the large amount of data that I obtained from the interviews through reading and re-reading the interviews, searching for themes and coding them; organizing sub-themes and categories, to assist me to answer the questions of my research and reveal participants' perceptions and insights regarding to the objectives of my research. I began with reading every interview independently and taking notes. Then, I emphasized themes and gathered them in files. After that, I put all similar themes in one group or under one title. Under these themes there are sub-themes and factors which are elements providing meanings and insights of participants in order to reach the research aims.

Documentary analysis: According to the description given by Mason (2002), documentation as a research method is considered a meaningful and useful tool for collecting qualitative data. Written information is likely to be significant to every case study topic (Yin, 2009). To obtain reliable data, documentary evidence is used in the present research to overcome the low reliability of the data produced from interviews. The documents and records related to performance appraisal practice such as annual appraisal reports and employees work files. Authorised access to the filled performance appraisal forms in the ACC for 2005 to 2010 was attained. These forms were reviewed to confirm evidence gained from the participants. A record was taken of all relevant comments made by the interviewees regarding company employees' performance appraisal.

Findings

Appraisal process

Company employees did not have full understanding of how the process is conducted and their direct managers did not carry out appraisal interviews with them. Also employees were not allowed to have their appraisal results unless their performance was poor. In general company employees experienced a lack of knowledge regarding the appraisal process and appraising their performance.

Criteria

Performance appraisal criteria in the ACC do not reflect the real level of employees' performance due to their focus on general aspects as well as the behaviours of company staff members. In addition, appraisal standards are not suitable for the various company jobs and duties. Many participants said that even though their PA criteria are clear and easy to understand, the company does not have holistic understanding of the level of performance of its staff. Also it is concluded that senior and top managers in the Libyan industry ministry and in the ACC play a leading and dominant role in setting the criteria of PA.

Aims of performance appraisal

The study has demonstrated that before the collapse of the former regime, PAS was ineffective and ineffectual; it used to be employed only for promoting company workers and some other managerial decisions. Its purposes were not clear to company managers as well as workers. As it has been indicated, this system was just a form to be filled in at the end of each year. Also, it was demonstrated that there is a lack of job description and job analysis as a basis for clear appraisal aims. In other words, the study confirmed that the purposes of PA in the ACC are to measure the past performance in order to take administrative decisions such as promotions and internal recruitment and to help the company to determine the differences between employees in order to distribute rewards and to change the positions of some workers from yearly contract to permanent workers.

The study demonstrated that employees are not very clear about the aims of their PAS. This means that practically this system is not fully supporting human resource decisions or fulfilling the intended aims. On the other hand, the formal rules towards PAS as stated by some appraisers in the ACC indicate that company performance appraisal was founded to support a variety of human resource decisions. While, the literature argues that the PAS has two main purposes: administrative (such as making decisions) and developmental, (such as to develop the performance of employees). ACC, apparently uses PA information only for administrative reasons (salary and promotions).

Implementation of the appraisal process

In the ACC, direct managers are responsible for the assessment of their employees. The appraisal processes are carried out by direct managers once a year (in December), however, direct managers said they did not give their employees written feedback, or explain to them how the appraisal process was carried out. At best, some of them gave their employees oral results. The study has demonstrated that employees do not know how the process of PA is conducted and they do not know their appraisal feedback. Also they are not allowed to talk about the appraisal procedures in the company. It is concluded that the appraisal process and its implementation are unclear to employees in the ACC, which leads to company workers being dissatisfied with the appraisal process and considering it as inaccurate. Also, it was confirmed that insufficient information is provided regarding the implementation of the process of PA in the ACC. The process is hidden and confidential, particularly as company regulations do not allow employees to understand how their performance is appraised.

Appraisal feedback

The study provides empirical evidence that managers in the ACC do not give their subordinates written feedback because the company strategies do not allow managers to offer their employees appraisal feedback. Managers orally notify their subordinates when they make mistakes or perform poorly, and they offer them general ideas about their level of performance in order to indicate which improvements they need for their future careers. Direct managers arrange time to explain the appraisal process and feedback only if their subordinates have asked for that. The study reveals that employees do not ask for appraisal feedback, as they do not see their appraisal feedback as an important matter; most employees already know that they will get their promotion even if they did not have good appraisal results, because of the impact of the Libyan culture and social criticism. Company decision makers do not provide their employees with appraisal feedback because they do not want their employees to compare their appraisal results, and wish to avoid complaints from them. Finally, the study concluded that company managers provide poor performers only with their appraisal feedback in order to improve their performance and ability to be able to have a high level of performance in the future.

Appraisal challenges

Three types of challenges are found to have a negative impact on the application of an effective PAS in the ACC. These challenges are: cultural challenges, managerial challenges and challenges related to people who are in charge of the PA process.

Cultural challenges

These challenges include six factors; these factors discuss how Libyan culture impacts HRM in the ACC and the process of performance appraisal as following:

1- Friend and family relationships: the study has demonstrated that Libyan culture is one of the main problems that face and impede the application of an effective PAS in the ACC, as the majority of managers in the company take their decisions based on their relationships with their employees, whether bases on friendship or family relationship. Also it is concluded that most company managers treat their friends and relatives differently from others in the appraisal reports or in any other aspects in the company.

2- Personal interests (favour to favour): the study has demonstrated that most people who are in charge of the PA process exchange benefits and interests. It is common in the company to find managers helping their colleagues in order to get their help in the future. A manager might evaluate an employee positively and provide excellent feedback not because of his/her high performance but because of exchange of interests with other managers in the company.

3- Wasta (nepotism): this study has revealed that during the time of the former regime, company managers were likely to be considered as a potential Wasta. In the ACC Wasta is assumed to be one of the biggest barriers that hold back ACC from applying accurate and effective performance appraisal process. The study has found that many managers in the company do not look at the process of PA as an important practice in their jobs because they already know the most employees were recruited according to wasta and nepotism, therefore, they fill the appraisal forms once a year and give a good grade to all employees in order to avoid appeals and complaints.

4- Tribal influence (social interactions): The study supports the argument that Libyan organisations as well as Arab companies still suffer from the negative aspects of tribal ties and primary group relations. The study also revealed that most company managers have strong relationships with their tribes; thus they treat employees differently and support them when they need help from those managers. Tribesmen in Libya feel proud when people from their tribes are well thought of in the country, and are in top positions. Therefore, tribes treat those people as their sons and expect from them full support and help. They look at this support as a duty for the tribe, and people who do not support their tribes are considered as without honour. Generally, the study concludes that tribal ties have influenced company managers negatively. Company managers keep in their mind the pressure of their tribes; thus, they do not write accurate performance appraisal reports. Also, tribesmen look at nepotism as a duty to do something for one's tribe; otherwise he will be criticised. People view these ties as creating loyalty and reflecting trust among the society. In fact such practices are contrary to Islamic values, but it was found that most employees in the company are not strict in adherence to the Islamic values, even though they know and understand that these values are very important in their religion.

5- Regionalism: The chosen company is working in four different Libyan cities; therefore, the majority of its employees are from these cities. It was found that company managers prefer to work with employees from their own cities and towns, as this guarantees employees' obedience and support. The study has found also that managers show their loyalty to their cities by helping friends and relatives from the city to get jobs in the company or to have good positions in their work, in the case of those who already work in the company. They look at it as a social obligation and responsibility to strengthen social relations and have a good reputation in their cities. Generally, the study revealed that regionalism is one of the main problems that face the application of an effective performance appraisal system in the company; many company managers find themselves unable to provide accurate and effective appraisal feedback as pressure from their neighbourhood forces them to be biased. Furthermore, the study found that many managers give employees from their cities priority in being selected for training sessions or awarded incentives; also they write them very good appraisal reports, so they can take advantage of company benefits. Those managers look at these actions as a kind of commitment to their regions and cities.

Managerial challenges

The study has revealed that PAS concentrates on measuring past performance rather than developing and improving employees' future performance. Moreover, the study found that the PAS in the ACC is a traditional one and it has not been updated for a long time. Another finding is that most managers in the company were not sufficiently trained to carry out the appraisal process. The study provides empirical evidence for the impact of wasta and nepotism on performance. This is consistent with management literature in the Arab world, which argues that Arab

culture has a huge impact on local organizations. The study also found that the ACC uses one type of PA system (direct manager appraisal). Also the study confirmed that the company applies a unified appraisal form to all types of jobs, despite the fact that the nature of these jobs is completely different. The appraisal outcomes are not used optimally in order to develop company employees' performance.

The influence of senior managers on line managers is evident in the conduct of appraisal process as well as other managerial functions such as appointing people in managerial positions. Also, it was shown that senior managers do not have much interest in PA; they do not take the appraisal process seriously, which leads to an inefficient PAS and inaccurate PA results. Again one key finding of this study is that the company's PAS is not connected to its strategic aims; PAS in the ACC helps its workers to take some administrative decisions such as promotions and determining training needs, as well as offering employees annual increases.

Because there is no relationship between the PAS and the strategic aims in this company, participants proposed that their company should improve its PAS and connect it to its strategic objectives. They also said the company PAS was prepared for short term goals such as giving rewards to employees to motivating them. The study indicated that the reason for the disconnection between company's strategic aims and its performance appraisal system is because the ACC is a state owned company and all managers and the majority of workers in the company are recruited permanently, therefore, they will take their salaries at the end of each month without looking if the company has achieved profits or not. This company is supported by the government, so they already know that they are safe and no one can lay them off.

Challenges related to appraisers' abilities

These challenges include two factors, qualifications and training, that affect appraisers' abilities in carrying out the appraisal process in the ACC as follows:

Factor 1- Qualifications and effectiveness: In relation to appraisers' qualifications and effectiveness in carrying out the appraisal process in the ACC, the study highlighted that many of them do not have enough managerial knowledge because their educational backgrounds are not related to management; their degrees are related to technical subjects such as engineering and manufacturing. Also, there is a huge lack of training sessions related to the management systems in general and to the practice of PA in particular.

Factor 2- Training sessions: The study concludes that appraisers in the ACC do not get appraisal related training, because their company offers only technical training. In addition, top personnel in the company offer these sessions to their friends and people who are loyal to them. The study reveals that training sessions in the company were purely technical rather than managerial; the main reason for the lack of attention of managerial training is the technical backgrounds of company managers; so they do not appreciate the advantages of performance appraisal.

Appraisal accuracy and transparency

In terms of accuracy of the PAS in the ACC, the study concludes that ACC does not have an accurate appraisal system; the system does not include all jobs aspects and it does not have clear evaluation criteria. Participants indicated that it is not enough for their company to assess its employees' performance once a year; they think PA should be done at least every three months to be accurate and have a clear picture about staff performance. Also they said ACC should have a multi-source performance appraisal to avoid many cultural issues such as nepotism and friendships and to have a precise PAS. In relation to appraisal transparency, the study reveals that there is huge lack of transparency in conducting the appraisal process in the company. Many managers in the company pay no attention to being transparent in their jobs; they do not show their subordinates their appraisal feedback to give them an opportunity to correct their mistakes. The study concludes that there is a lack of transparency in the ACC; the corruption of the former political regime was one of the main reasons for that, as managers who had obvious bias and managerial mistakes stayed in their positions or were even promoted to higher positions.

Management support for appraisal

The study reveals that PAS in the ACC does not have enough support from company top managers. It has not been developed for long a time, there is a lack of training related to this practice; and company managers who are in charge of performance appraisal are not prepared enough to conduct the appraisal practice. In addition, company decision makers do not take serious actions against people who have low performance and productivity. The study also concludes that top management people do not look at the total results of the employees to see their effectiveness and to see the trend of the productivity of the company; they just conduct the appraisal process and do not look at the appraisal forms again until the time for deciding promotions. In addition, they do not offer company managers who carry out the appraisal process training connected to HR practices in general and to PA in particular. Also, company senior managers do not support their appraisal system in terms of providing professionals in this subject and they do not put the right man in the right place. In the ACC there are many managers who should not be in these positions as they are not qualified enough to be managers and to evaluate other people's performance.

Meaning of work and Contextual change (17th of Feb revolution in 2011)

In relation to the recent situation in Libya, the study reveals that before the uprising the whole Libyan context in general and in the ACC particularly were influenced by the political unrest and uprising in February 2011. The study concludes that ACC's work has been adversely affected by the uprising and war. Company productivity and performance were very low, and it has experienced heavy losses as all its plants stopped working and there was a huge lack of spare parts; also most foreign workers went back to their countries. The study also reveals that before the uprising, company work lacked innovation and participation; it depended completely on the policies and plans of the former regime. Administrative instability was very common in the company as people in the important positions could be changed after being in these posts for only a few months without any type of notification. ACC suffered from job dissatisfaction, lack of equal opportunity and lack of criteria in the policies for appointing people to leadership potions in the company, also teamwork and enthusiasm were absent. It was clear that there was a lack of job commitment among company workers before the uprising. Generally the work environment in the ACC was characterized by organizational corruption, lack of trust and absence of scientific methods in selecting and appointing people, especially managers. Instead, social ties and relationships played a major role in such matters.

However, during the period of the uprising, the study revealed most managers and employees did come to work; nevertheless, the company's productivity and performance were reduced dramatically, also the company has experienced a big loss as all its plants stopped working and there was a huge lack of spare parts. Also the departure of foreign workers also created problems.

After the revolution was successful, the ACC still suffered from the influence of the war and some managerial problems such as instability and corruption. However, new company decision makers were trying to overcome these issues and lead their company to achive high performance and high productivity. Also, the study revealed the company's new top managers are well qualified to be in these positions, so they can help the company to be effective and efficient. In addition, managers as well as employees in the ACC are ready to participate positively in the interest of their company and they believe that their company will be better in the future. The study indicated that most of new company managers were chosen according to their qualifications and their loyalty to the 17th of February revolution at the same time. In addition, the study found the relationship between company employees became much better and stronger than before the uprising; this is because during the time of the past regime, there was a lack of trust among company workers; employees did not trust each other because some employees were recruited not as needed staff, but as plain clothes police to write reports for the former government. With these pressures and suspicions removed, staff could focus on fruitful working relationships.

Implications

The study employed a qualitative case study methodology to gain an in-depth understanding of the process of performance appraisal and the meaning of work in the Libyan context. Data collection methods such interviewing participants enabled me to capture participants' perceptions and perspectives without predetermining those viewpoints through selection of questionnaire categories (Patton, 2002). This methodology could also be used to identify other relevant factors that affect the appraisal process in other contexts. Furthermore, qualitative case studies could be used to understand how particular conditions affect employee perceptions.

The study supports the argument that people's beliefs and values impact their perceptions and attitudes regarding work. Understanding these values is very important, since they help in predicting and monitoring employees' behaviours in the workplace in order to have satisfactory performance and productivity. In addition, this study provides evidence that culture, societies and context influence our understandings of performance appraisal process and the meaning of work and lead to various perceptions of these practices, so various forms of evaluation could be employed. Also, the study provides empirical evidence that for people from collectivist society, social factors have a strong role in shaping the meanings of work and explanations of managerial practices.

This research was limited by focussing on the cement industry in Libya. Hence the generalizability of such understandings and explanations is limited because of the subjective nature of this study. This highlights a need for research involving larger samples, and wide range of quantitative data collection methods, which could establish the generalizability of the research findings. Also the findings of this research were based on the collected data from male interviewees only, it was not possible to interview female participates as all senior and line managers in the ACC were male. However, understanding the perceptions of women in leadership positions could offer a more holistic understanding of the practice and richer data.

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