



The Good, the Bad and the Ineffective: An Appraisal of Performance Appraisals

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ABSTRACT

This paper is a review of recent literature and industrial examples of performance appraisal practices to explore effective strategies and persistent challenges that are hampering effective implementation of the process. The findings indicated a shift among companies with best practices, from traditional appraisal models to a more dynamic approach that prioritises continuous feedback, employee engagement, and alignment with strategic goals. To illustrate and exemplify these developments, the innovative systems of three global companies were highlighted for their impact on performance and retention. The study also identifies enduring issues that are disabling effective performance appraisals, such as bias, transparency, and resistance to change. In addition, forced or relative ranking was examined which revealed its potential for higher competitiveness and top performer identification, while negatively impacting the workforce through decreased collaboration and affected employee morale. To address these challenges, based on the review conducted, this study proposes strengthening alignment of goal setting and performance monitoring with organisational goals, improving fairness and transparency, incorporating continuous feedback, leveraging technology, and enhancing supervisor training. By leveraging on best practices and addressing the identified gaps, organisations could be on the road to strengthened organisational performance and enhanced employee satisfaction.

Keywords: performance review, appraisals, human resource, talent management, human capital

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1 INTRODUCTION

Performance appraisal is a structured process for evaluating employee performance and potential, providing feedback to recognise achievements, guiding career development, and supporting human resource (HR) decisions while aligning employee contributions with organisational goals (Barbieri et al., 2023; Lameque et al., 2023; Sadiyawati & Hasanati, 2024; Su, 2024). The formalisation of performance appraisals within organisations began in the early 20th century, influenced by the scientific management theories of Frederick Taylor, who emphasised efficiency and productivity through the systematic study of tasks and workflow (Roethlisberger et al., 2003). This movement led to a focus on employee incentives linked to individual performance, shaping modern appraisal practices.

Over time, performance appraisal has evolved from a low-transparency, highly exclusive administrative process to a more transparent system incorporating self-appraisals aligned with organisational goals (Francis et al., 2021; Li et al., 2022; Parry, 2024). Recent trends in performance appraisals include a shift from rigid conventional methods to continuous feedback and coaching, the integration of technology, and adaptations to remote work environments, all with a focus on enhancing objectivity and accuracy (Cai, 2024; Supiati et al., 2024; Ullah et al., 2021). These trends reflect a shift from traditional approaches to a more ongoing system, especially as the workplace becomes more diverse with employees of varying ages, backgrounds, and emerging expectations (Tarigan et al., 2023; Thomas et al., 2024).

The reception of current performance appraisal systems globally has been mixed. According to a Gallup study, only 2% of Chief HR Officers believe their performance management systems are effectively delivering on their objectives (Wigert, 2024). Following the COVID-19 pandemic, 87% of HR leaders surveyed indicated that they expect changes to performance review approaches (Gartner, 2020). A McKinsey survey found that over half of employees believe formal performance management processes do not impact employee or company performance (Field et al., 2023). However, the same study also revealed that companies prioritising employee performance are 4.2 times more likely to outperform their peers, achieving 30% higher revenue growth and 5% lower attrition rates, which highlights the value of focusing on this process (Lasa et al., 2024). Similarly, a Boston Consulting Group report highlighted that 81% of employees desire flexibility in where they work, 93% seek flexibility in when they work, and companies that meet these preferences are 1.6 times more likely to retain employees for at least an additional year (Boston Consulting Group, 2023). These findings suggest that while organisations recognise the need for strategic and adaptive appraisal systems, many still struggle with implementation gaps. Without significant improvements in manager training and appraisal frameworks, employee disengagement and performance biases are likely to persist.

While research on performance appraisals is growing, several areas remain for further exploration. These include analyses of current training approaches, assessing organisational commitment, determining fairness, turnover intentions, and the specific impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic (Francis et al., 2021). Further studies are also needed on the fundamental purpose of performance appraisals which, although seemingly elementary, remain an essential question in the field (Lameque et al., 2023). These observations highlight the complexity and evolving nature of the

topic, providing an interesting foundation for this review paper. Recent research outputs from 2020 to 2024 were gathered, assessed, and analysed, leading to three key questions guiding this review: (1) What are the recurring themes in recent literature on performance appraisals? (2) What challenges hinder the effective implementation of performance appraisal systems? (3) What considerations should organisations take into account when addressing these challenges and implementing effective systems?

2 METHODS

This study combines two methods: (1) narrative review of academic literature, and (2) case study of industrial practice and thematic analysis, to investigate effective performance appraisal practices and the challenges that arise in implementing organisational performance management. This integrated approach ensures a comprehensive understanding of theoretical frameworks while also appreciating practical applications within the field.

2.1 Narrative Review

For the narrative review, the method outlined by Baumeister & Leary (1997) was adopted, which includes defining the topic, identifying and selecting relevant literature, thematically organising the literature, and synthesising the findings to develop a coherent narrative. In the context of this study, a review of existing literature on performance appraisals was conducted to identify trends, challenges, and innovations from academic papers published between 2020 and 2024. This period was chosen for its relevance in capturing developments from the onset of COVID-19 to the present day, reflecting the organisational adaptations to pandemic-driven changes. As COVID-19 disrupted traditional work models, shifting from in-person to remote working, it also accelerated changes in performance appraisal methods. Additionally, remote working forced organisations to rethink how employees are assessed, increasing the emphasis on technology adoption and consideration for employee well-being, as demonstrated in the literature review and case study in this paper. Prior to 2020, more conventional appraisal methods were still prevalent, largely due to the global stability in the world of work. The shift from rigid to agile models at the onset of the pandemic raises an interesting perspective on how practices have developed and evolved to the present day, hence the focus on recent literature from the past five years.

Regarding document selection, peer-reviewed journal articles, conference proceedings, and reports from reputable consulting firms (e.g., McKinsey, Boston Consulting Group, Deloitte) were retrieved from databases such as Google Scholar, Scopus, the Directory of Open Access Journals (DOAJ), and company websites. In determining the search terms, keywords relevant to performance appraisals and management processes were identified and combined; accordingly, the search process was conducted manually. These search terms included “performance appraisal,” “performance review,” and “employee evaluation,” with a focus on papers published since 2020 and on performance appraisal practices within organisational contexts. This process provided relevant evidence and theoretical insights aligned with the research objectives, while excluding opinion pieces and publications that were not focused on appraisals or were outside the specified timeframe. In total, 56 references were included, of which 40 were peer-reviewed journal articles,

12 were industry reports, and four were company publications. Among the peer-reviewed journal articles, 18 were retrieved from Google Scholar, 17 from Scopus, and five from DOAJ.

2.2 Case Study of Industrial Practice and Thematic Analysis

To complement the literature review, case studies of three companies with exemplary performance appraisal practices were analysed via document review (Burkus, 2016; Celen, 2021; McCord, 2014). The case study approach adopted follows the method outlined by Yin (2018), which includes case planning, study design, data collection and analysis, and reporting. The selection of these companies—Adobe, Google, and Netflix—is based on their reputation for pioneering innovative approaches to performance appraisals, which have also influenced global HR practices. Furthermore, information on the practices of these companies is publicly available through both industry and academic commentaries and publications, including industry reports, peer-reviewed journals, and corporate documents. These three companies employ diverse performance appraisal approaches, each emphasising high performance and accountability while offering distinct perspectives on modern evaluation methods. However, it should be acknowledged that all three companies are from the technology sector and are based in the United States. As such, there are industry- and region-specific business cultures and practices that may not be directly applicable to other contexts.

From the data gathered, thematic analysis was employed to identify patterns, key practices, and outcomes from the selected companies, with findings categorised into effective practices, challenges, and implications for broader organisational contexts. For clarity, this study only analyses publicly available sources, and no primary data was collected from the companies; there was no direct engagement with the organisations. This study also does not represent official statements from the companies, nor does it claim affiliation with them. The findings are solely the interpretation of the author. The activities undertaken as part of the research methods are outlined in a flowchart in Figure 1.

3 FINDINGS

3.1 The Good: Effective Practices in Performance Appraisals

The literature on performance appraisal from the past five years highlights several key findings regarding practices that are considered effective. Tarigan et al. (2023) proposed a framework that addresses concerns about fairness and emphasises design elements, considering psychological factors as well as political influences, arguing that these elements are crucial for the effective execution of appraisals. Another perspective suggests that the effectiveness of an appraisal system is defined by improvements in employee performance and development, which can also be achieved through training and communication (Sadiyawati & Hasanati, 2024; Singh et al., 2021). Clarity in goal setting is also identified as a key success factor in the continued process of performance appraisal, where job-specific achievements, personal attributes, and perceived potential are clearly and objectively outlined (Kostovyat & Rogov, 2023; Su, 2024). Moreover, adequate preparation for the appraisal process, which can take place throughout the year, is critical

for enhancing performance; coupled with a clear distinction between personal traits and achievements, without bias, as part of overall employee retention (Norman et al., 2023; Ogbodo et al., 2023; Swetha & Madhiyarsi, 2023). Reflecting on these findings regarding best practices, several companies stand out for successfully putting theory into practice, namely Adobe, Google, and Netflix.

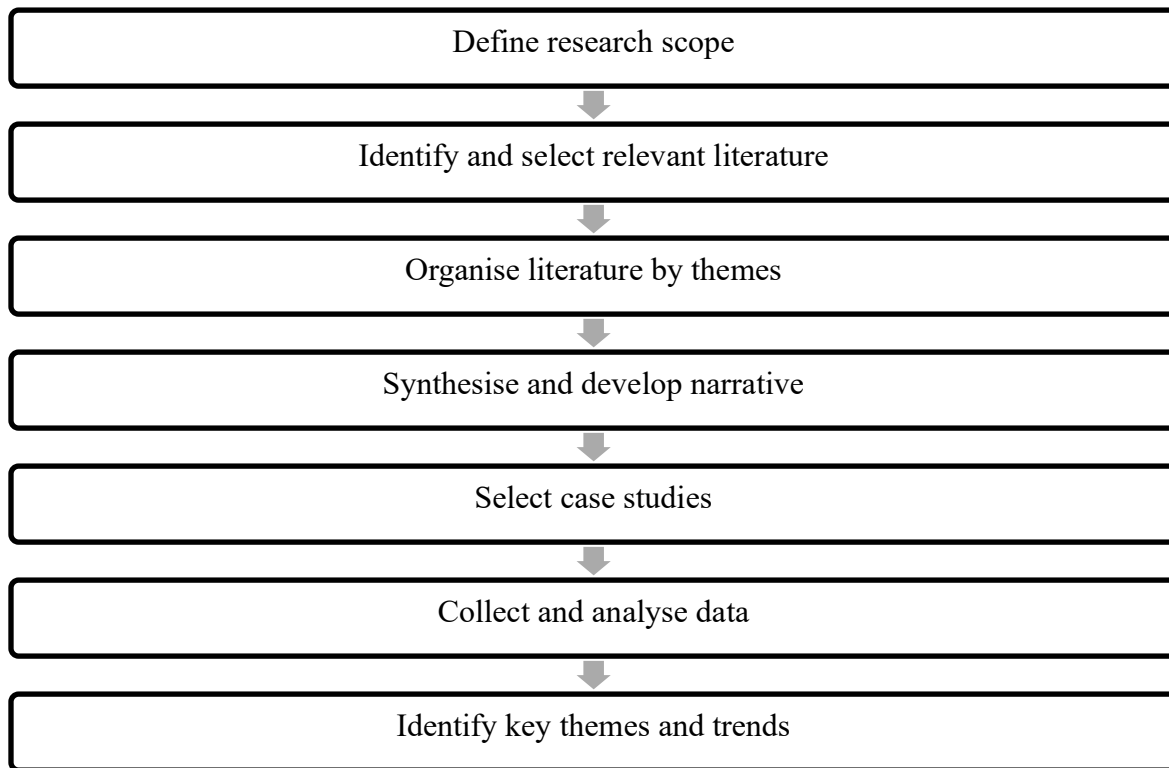


Figure 1. Overview of activities undertaken as part of narrative review and case analysis.

In 2012, American software firm Adobe replaced traditional annual performance reviews with a ‘check-in’ system, emphasising ongoing, two-way conversations between employees and managers to discuss performance and provide real-time feedback (Adobe, 2024). This model allows for periodic coaching and the identification of growth opportunities which addresses deficiencies in the traditional review system (Hinds et al., 2014). As a result, this approach has led to increased employee engagement and a 30% reduction in voluntary turnover (Burkus, 2016). In 2022, Adobe further enhanced its ‘check-in’ system by introducing a digital-first, integrated dashboard that enables employees to manage performance, track progress, and solicit real-time feedback (Miller, 2022). While this approach is highly praised, for application in other organisations, it requires ongoing awareness, centralised change management through an ‘employee resource centre’, and continued upskilling of leaders to effectively undertake the process (Morris, 2014).

Departing from the traditional approach of key performance indicators (KPIs), Google has been among the pioneers in using objectives and key results (OKRs). While KPIs measure ongoing

performance against specific benchmarks, OKRs set ambitious goals with measurable outcomes to drive alignment, focus, and innovation (Hoerger, 2020). Through OKRs, Google has been able to (1) prioritise objectives by focusing on a few high-impact goals, (2) set quantifiable key results to track progress, and (3) encourage regular review cycles and adaptability, enabling teams to refine goals and strategies (Celen, 2021). While OKRs offer various advantages in driving performance, several challenges persist in effectively implementing it across different organisations including cultural resistance and inconsistent application across departments (Fernandes & Gomes, 2023). These challenges highlight the need for careful consideration of change management and consistent follow-through to ensure effective application of the desired appraisal approach.

At Netflix, performance management is conducted via a ‘dream team’ approach, focusing on assembling high-performing employees who excel both individually and as part of teams, fostering a high-performance environment (Netflix, 2024). Netflix also implements continuous feedback and enhanced transparency to maximise the potential of their workforce (Sekar, 2024). The company adopts a flat organisational structure, which empowers employees (Talent Management Institute, 2024), fostering innovation and success (Denning, 2018). According to Netflix’s former chief talent officer Patty McCord, Netflix abandoned formal annual appraisal systems, deeming them unnecessary and costly, instead trusting managers to make performance decisions informally based on evidenced outcomes (McCord, 2014; Schröder-Hansen & Hansen, 2023). Another practice is the ‘keeper test’ which asks whether managers would fight to retain an employee (Netflix, 2024). However, implementing these approaches in other organisations does pose potential challenges such as the motivational or emotional impact on employees, and the likelihood of undermining long-term loyalty by prioritising high performance over job security (Kim, 2024). A summary of the analysed companies and their appraisal models are outlined in Table 1.

3.2 The Bad: Ineffective Practices in Performance Appraisals

The literature on performance appraisals highlights several ineffective practices that hinder the success of performance management systems, including biased and unfair processes, lack of transparency regarding procedural clarity, and insufficient consideration of psychological and political influences (Al-Obaidi et al., 2022; Hameed et al., 2023). These flawed aspects can lead to the loss of talent, negatively impacting overall organisational performance (Norman et al., 2023; Schröder-Hansen & Hansen, 2023). The studies analysed in this review also propose solutions for improving fairness and effectiveness, particularly by mitigating biases and refining appraisal processes (Sinha, 2024; Tarigan et al., 2023).

Another prominent issue with performance appraisals is lack of transparency. Recent literature suggests that this challenge often arises from manual processes, personal biases, and the absence of clear benchmarks across implemented systems. The lack of transparency in job descriptions and personal biases can significantly hinder the effectiveness of performance appraisals in improving employee performance (Etalong et al., 2022). The consequences of a lack of transparency include confusion in direction, unclear goals, and miscommunication. On the other hand, research indicates that fair and transparent performance appraisal systems improve job satisfaction and

organisational effectiveness, which are linked to higher productivity and performance (Al-Obaidi et al., 2022; Dattner, 2020; Gosavi & Wakchaure, 2024; Tarigan et al., 2023). Therefore, effective performance appraisal systems should consider the adoption of technology-driven tools that incorporate multiple performance metrics to increase transparency, efficiency, participation, and satisfaction (Emmanuel & John, 2021). Such tools can more accurately link employee efforts to outcomes, though this may be less applicable to more subjective roles such as strategy development and planning. Transparent assessments are critical for building trust and fairness during performance evaluations, and incorporating self-appraisal techniques can promote transparency (Parry, 2024; Shobrun et al., 2023). This approach can strike a balance between the perspectives of the employee, line manager, and the executive team.

Table 1. Overview of performance management approaches.

Company	Approach	Benefits	Potential Challenges
Adobe	'Check-In' System: Ongoing, two-way conversations between employees and managers, supported by a digital dashboard	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increased employee engagement and a 30% reduction in voluntary turnover (Burkus, 2016) Enhanced performance tracking and real-time feedback (Miller, 2022) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Requires ongoing awareness and centralised change management (Morris, 2014) Leaders need continuous upskilling to manage the process effectively
Google	Objectives and Key Results (OKRs): Ambitious goals with measurable outcomes, enabling alignment and innovation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Prioritise high-impact goals (Celen, 2021) Foster accountability with clear, quantifiable results Encourage adaptability via regular review cycles 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Cultural resistance to new frameworks (Fernandes & Gomes, 2023) Demands significant resources for implementation Inconsistent application across teams
Netflix	'Dream Team' Approach: High-performing teams, continuous feedback, and informal performance evaluations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Foster innovation and success in a high-performance environment (Denning, 2018) Empower employees with a flat organisational structure (Talent Management Institute, 2024) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Creates anxiety and reduced morale due to the 'keeper test' (Kim, 2024) May undermine long-term loyalty by prioritising performance over job security

A long-standing debate within performance appraisal literature concerns the use of ‘forced’ or relative ranking systems. Proponents argue that forced ranking can improve evaluation efficiency and motivate higher performance through competition (Emmanuel & John, 2021; Shobrun et al., 2023). However, it is also acknowledged that such systems can introduce biases related to supervisor-subordinate relationships. As such, any adoption of forced ranking systems requires careful design to be effective. While forced ranking can outperform individual evaluations in some contexts, supervisors are often more likely to provide higher evaluations when they have longer relationships with subordinates (Castro-Pires, 2024; Hao, 2021). Additionally, while some argue that forced ranking fosters a high-performance culture, it can also lead to reduced collaboration and lower morale, emphasising the importance of context and implementation for determining the system's effectiveness (Rubin & Edwards, 2020). Forced ranking is also said to be effective in identifying top performers, but it can create unhealthy competition and have negative effects on employee morale (Kaur, 2021). Views on forced ranking are mixed in the literature, but it remains a common practice across organisations (Kaur, 2021).

Based on the themes discussed, several opportunities for improvement emerge. To manage bias and subjectivity, which can lead to inconsistent and unfair evaluations, organisations can use data-driven and objective performance tracking to mitigate unfairness through merit-based recognition. Further, employee engagement can be improved through self-assessment and ongoing coaching conversations between line managers and their direct reports. The adoption of technology can help accelerate these processes by testing and scaling effective strategies. Further considerations on these areas will be explored in the following chapter.

4 DISCUSSION: WHAT CAN COMPANIES DO MOVING FORWARD?

As outlined in the Introduction section, three key questions guide the development of this study: the themes observed in recent literature on performance appraisals, the challenges faced in effective implementation, and potential action items for consideration. From the analysis and assessment conducted, three main challenges to effective performance appraisals have emerged: bias, transparency, and relative ranking. These factors can significantly impact employee morale and motivation. In addressing these challenges, the research papers and industry reports analysed suggest that companies can improve their performance appraisal processes by aligning appraisals with organisational goals, providing regular continuous feedback, ensuring fairness and transparency, enhancing supervisor capabilities, and incorporating technology-driven systems.

However, it needs to be recognised that while these practices can likely be adopted and adapted by other organisations, they must be implemented with proper contextualisation, given the unique nature of how modern-day organisations operate. For example, when adopting Adobe’s continuous ‘check-in’ system, manager training is critical to ensure that feedback is delivered effectively. In adopting Google’s OKR model, performance metrics need to be balanced with employee well-being to prevent burnout. Regarding Netflix’s model, a performance-driven culture can undoubtedly drive productivity and outcomes, but fairness and psychological safety must also be prioritised. In short, while these methods are effective, they are not ready-made solutions that can be immediately implemented universally without adaptation.

An early step for companies to consider is reviewing their existing systems and processes to ensure they are accurately assessing employee performance (Ogbodo et al., 2023). In doing so, a holistic view of all known performance metrics is essential to ensure transparency, efficiency, and improved worker satisfaction (Emmanuel & John, 2021). Companies could explore methods such as the Analytical Hierarchy Process, which involves comparing criteria to ensure objective, data-driven evaluations (RR Fera Pratiwi et al., 2024). Companies can improve their performance appraisal processes by addressing employee perceptions, as these shape employees' belief in the organisation's fairness, ultimately fostering a culture of trust and encouraging long-term engagement. An effective performance appraisal system should meet employee expectations for regular feedback and promote improved communication across all levels of the workforce (S. Singh & Pandey, 2023). A more contemporary consideration is the adoption of machine learning and artificial intelligence (AI) to enhance the performance appraisal process by addressing attribution errors and rater biases (Crews, 2021). A summary of these considerations and how they can enhance organisational performance appraisal practices is outlined in Table 2.

While extensive research on performance appraisals exists, based on the literature collected for this study, more empirical evidence could be generated, given the growing interest in the direct practical application of insights and findings from the field. The comparison of performance appraisal models in this study aims to build upon previous research by exemplifying real-world applications. One unifying theme that emerges from the analysis is the shift towards employee-centric performance appraisals, which place the worker at the centre of the process. This is often achieved through the empowerment of the process and democratised monitoring, which cascades down to line managers.

Table 2. Action items for organisational consideration.

Key Actions	Details	Benefits
Align appraisals with organisational goals	Ensure performance appraisals align with strategic objectives for clearer outcomes	Improve alignment of employee efforts with organisational success
Enhance fairness and transparency	Address employee perceptions of fairness to foster trust and encourage long-term engagement	Build trust and strengthen employee engagement over time
Provide regular feedback and communication	Promote frequent and continuous feedback, and open communication to meet employee expectations and enhance trust	Enhance communication and foster a culture of openness and trust
Enhance supervisor training	Train supervisors to effectively execute fair and consistent appraisals	Increase appraisal effectiveness and consistency across the organisation
Incorporate technology-driven systems	Leverage AI to reduce rater bias and address attribution errors in performance evaluations	Enhance accuracy and reduce biases in performance appraisals

5 CONCLUSION

In conclusion, performance appraisals remain a vital component of an effective HR management system, serving as a key mechanism for assessing staff performance against organisational goals and ensuring commitment to individual roles. However, successful implementation of appraisal systems requires balancing theoretical advancements as discussed in this paper, with strategic application of best practices demonstrated by the three companies analysed. These organisations highlight the transformative potential of innovative appraisal systems, such as continuous feedback models, OKRs, and technology-driven evaluations, which foster alignment, transparency, and employee engagement. Despite this progress, persistent challenges—such as biases, fairness concerns, and a lack of transparency—continue to hinder the effectiveness of appraisal processes. These issues highlight the need for ongoing refinement of appraisal practices. Based on the findings of this study, future research could focus on the behavioural aspects of how employees respond to appraisal systems, as well as on technological advancements that can address emerging challenges and ensure fair appraisals. Ultimately, adopting well-designed, inclusive, and adaptive performance appraisal systems is essential to maximising employee potential and achieving long-term organisational success.

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