



(RESEARCH ARTICLE)



An evaluation of performance appraisal on employee performance among non-academic staff: A case of the University of Zambia

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Abstract

This study evaluated the effectiveness of the performance appraisal system on employee performance among non-academic staff at the University of Zambia. Performance appraisal is a critical human resource management tool aimed at enhancing employee productivity, motivation, and organizational effectiveness. Despite its importance, many institutions continue to face challenges in implementing appraisal systems that meaningfully contribute to staff performance. This study adopted a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews to capture both the measurable and experiential dimensions of performance appraisal practices. The research targeted non-academic staff across various departments of the University of Zambia, employing stratified random sampling to select a representative sample. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, correlation, and regression analyses, while qualitative responses were subjected to thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns and insights.

Findings revealed that while the University has a structured appraisal system in place, several limitations hinder its effectiveness. These include insufficient supervisor training, lack of regular and constructive feedback, limited transparency in the appraisal process, low employee participation in goal setting, and minimal integration of appraisal outcomes with rewards or professional development opportunities. The regression analysis indicated a positive relationship between effective appraisal practices and employee performance, with supervisor competency, timely feedback, and participatory goal setting emerging as key predictors of improved performance outcomes.

Based on these findings, the study recommends strategic interventions to enhance the appraisal system. These include comprehensive training programs for supervisors, implementation of regular feedback mechanisms, promotion of transparency in evaluation criteria, active employee involvement in the appraisal process, and the adoption of digital performance management tools to streamline data collection and reporting. Improving these areas is expected to increase employee motivation, accountability, and overall productivity among non-academic staff.

The study contributes to the understanding of performance appraisal in higher education institutions in Zambia and provides practical strategies for optimizing appraisal systems to support organizational performance. It underscores the critical link between well-implemented appraisal practices and staff effectiveness, offering evidence-based guidance for policymakers, human resource managers, and university administrators seeking to enhance performance management outcomes.

Keywords: Performance appraisal; Employee Performance; Motivation; Job satisfaction

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1. Introduction

Performance appraisal is a systematic and formal process through which organizations assess and evaluate employees' job performance against predetermined standards, organizational objectives, and competency frameworks (Aguinis 2023). Therefore, performance appraisal remains a central mechanism for regulating employee performance, yet persistent complaints of bias, subjectivity, and weak feedback systems suggest that many organizations still treat appraisal as a routine administrative exercise rather than a strategic performance tool (Phiri and Bwalya, 2022; Zulu, 2023).

Therefore, it was against this background that this study evaluated the performance appraisal on performance among non-academic staff. Performance appraisal had been widely recognized as a fundamental human resource management practice both globally and nationally due to its influence on employee performance, organizational effectiveness, accountability, and employee development. According to Armstrong (2021), performance appraisal systems had been used by organizations to systematically evaluate employees' work performance, identify strengths and weaknesses, and align individual performance with organizational goals. Similarly, Aguinis (2023) argued that effective performance appraisal practices contributed significantly to organizational productivity, employee motivation, and institutional accountability.

At the global level, United Nations agencies such as the International Labour Organization (ILO) and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) had promoted results-based management frameworks aimed at strengthening employee performance and institutional efficiency. These agencies emphasized performance planning, monitoring, evaluation, and continuous feedback as critical elements of effective performance management systems. The emphasis on structured performance appraisal systems had been linked to improved service delivery and enhanced organizational accountability across both public and private institutions (ILO, 2022; UNDP, 2023).

At the regional level, organizations such as the Southern African Development Community (SADC) and the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA) had also promoted governance frameworks that emphasized human resource development, accountability, and performance monitoring within member states. These regional bodies recognized that effective performance management systems were essential for strengthening institutional capacity, improving workforce productivity, and promoting transparency in organizational operations (SADC, 2021; COMESA, 2022).

Within Zambia, performance appraisal systems had been institutionalized within the public service through the Annual Performance Appraisal System (APAS), which was introduced as part of broader public sector reforms aimed at improving efficiency and accountability in government institutions. The system had been guided by various statutory and administrative frameworks under the Zambian Public Service Management reforms, which emphasized work planning, performance monitoring, and evaluation of employee outputs (Government of the Republic of Zambia, 2020). In addition, civil society organizations such as the Jesuit Centre for Theological Reflection (JCTR) and Transparency International Zambia (TIZ) had continued to advocate for improved accountability and transparency in public sector performance management systems (JCTR, 2021; TIZ, 2022).

Study Objectives

- To examine the structure and components of the performance appraisal system at the University of Zambia.
- To evaluate the effect of performance appraisals on employee motivation, job satisfaction, and productivity at the University of Zambia.
- To suggest strategies aimed at improving performance appraisal practices at the University of Zambia.

2. Theoretical framework

In the context of evaluating the performance appraisal system at the University of Zambia, Expectancy Theory provides a crucial lens for understanding employee motivation and behaviour. Contemporary scholars have reaffirmed that employees are motivated when they perceive a clear and meaningful relationship between effort, performance, and rewards (Vroom, 2021; Lunenburg, 2021). The theory is built on three key components expectancy, instrumentality, and valence which collectively explain how employees decide to exert effort in organizational settings (Robbins and Judge, 2022).

2.1. Application of Expectancy Theory to the Study

Expectancy refers to the belief that one’s effort will lead to desired levels of performance. Within the performance appraisal system at the University of Zambia, this study examined how employees understood the relationship between their work efforts and the criteria used to evaluate their performance. When employees perceived that effort led to improved appraisal outcomes, they were more likely to demonstrate higher motivation and commitment (Armstrong, 2021). Conversely, unclear appraisal criteria reduced motivation and weakened performance outcomes.

Instrumentality is the perceived likelihood that achieving a certain level of performance will result in receiving a reward. In this study, the linkage between performance appraisal outcomes and rewards such as promotions, salary increments, training opportunities, and recognition (e.g., Labour Day awards) was examined. Evidence suggested that employees were more engaged when appraisal systems were perceived as fair, transparent, and consistently linked to rewards (Aguinis, 2023). However, weak or inconsistent reward systems tended to undermine trust and reduce employee commitment.

Valence refers to the value employees attach to the rewards they receive. This study assessed whether rewards associated with performance appraisal at the University of Zambia aligned with employee expectations and preferences. Research has shown that employees value rewards differently, and systems that fail to consider these differences often have limited motivational impact (DeNisi and Murphy, 2022). Therefore, aligning rewards with employee needs was critical in enhancing motivation and satisfaction.

By applying Expectancy Theory, this study assessed whether the performance appraisal system at the University of Zambia effectively motivated non-academic staff by linking effort, performance, and rewards. It further examined perceptions of fairness, transparency, and consistency in the appraisal process and how these influenced motivation, job satisfaction, and productivity. Identifying gaps within expectancy, instrumentality, and valence provided a basis for recommending improvements to align appraisal practices with employee expectations and organizational goals.

3. Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this study illustrated the relationship between performance appraisal practices and employee performance among non-academic staff at the University of Zambia.

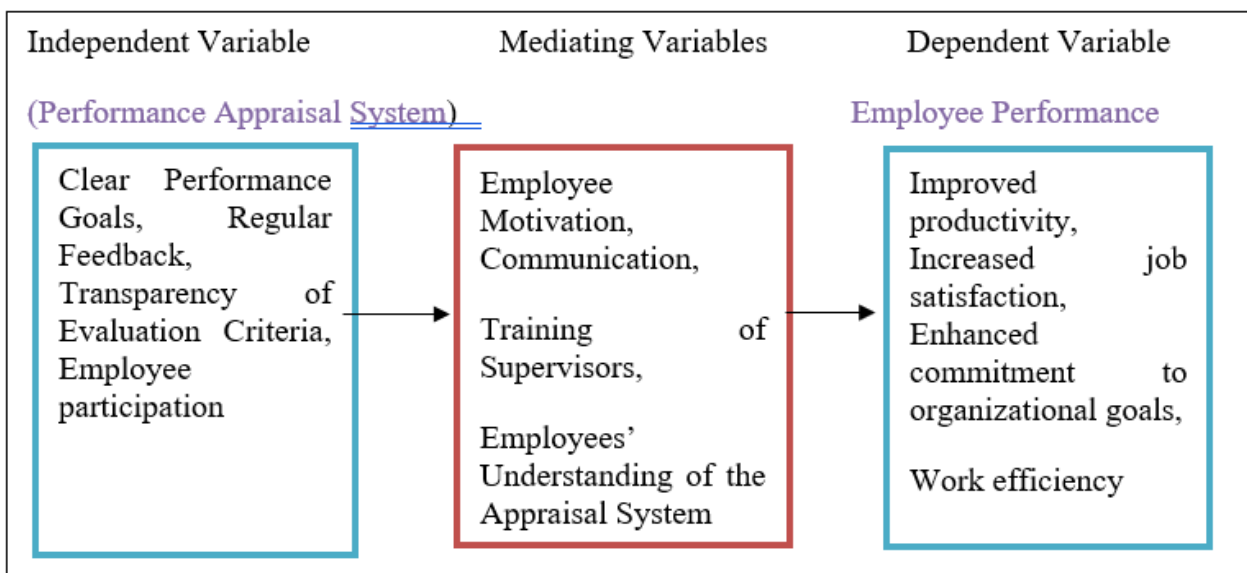


Figure 1 Author’s Illustration

4. Literature Review

Scholars have also emphasized that performance management systems must be integrated with organizational strategy in order to enhance accountability, motivation, and productivity (Aguinis, 2023). In recent years, research methods such as quantitative surveys, qualitative interviews, case studies, and mixed-method approaches have been widely used to

examine how performance management systems influence employee performance and organizational outcomes (Creswell and Creswell, 2022).

4.1. Empirical studies

4.1.1. Local Context

A study conducted by Chikuta and Nyirenda (2021) investigated the effectiveness of the performance appraisal system at the University of Zambia. The researchers employed a quantitative survey research design, collecting data from 120 academic and non-academic staff using structured questionnaires. Data were analysed using descriptive statistics and regression analysis. The results revealed that the performance appraisal system at the university faced several challenges, including the absence of standardised performance indicators, subjective evaluation practices, and limited feedback from supervisors. The study further revealed that many employees were dissatisfied with the system because appraisal results were rarely linked to career development opportunities such as promotions, professional training, or salary adjustments. The researchers concluded that the lack of transparency and consistency in the appraisal process significantly reduced employee trust in the system and weakened its effectiveness as a performance management tool.

The findings from Chikuta and Nyirenda's study are highly relevant to the current research because they highlight critical weaknesses in the appraisal system at the University of Zambia. In particular, the lack of objective performance metrics and inadequate feedback mechanisms suggest that employees may not fully understand how their work performance is evaluated. This gap is important because performance appraisal systems are expected to provide employees with clear guidance on how to improve their performance and achieve organisational goals. Therefore, the present study seeks to examine the extent to which the current appraisal system at UNZA uses objective performance indicators and whether such practices influence employee performance outcomes.

Another empirical study conducted by Mwanza and Kalaba (2022) examined the relationship between performance appraisal practices and employee motivation in selected public universities in Zambia. The researchers used a mixed-methods research design, combining quantitative surveys with qualitative interviews. A total of 150 employees participated in the study, and the data were analysed using statistical analysis for quantitative data and thematic analysis for qualitative responses. The results indicated that performance appraisals had a moderate positive relationship with employee motivation and job satisfaction. Employees reported that positive feedback and recognition from supervisors increased their motivation to perform better. However, the study also revealed that appraisal processes were often irregular and inconsistently implemented across departments. Some employees reported that appraisals were conducted only when required for administrative purposes, rather than as part of a continuous performance management process.

Mwanza and Kalaba concluded that although performance appraisals have the potential to enhance motivation, their effectiveness depends largely on consistency and meaningful feedback. The study recommended that universities should adopt a structured appraisal framework that ensures regular evaluations, constructive feedback, and clear links between performance outcomes and rewards. The findings of this study are relevant to the current research because they demonstrate the importance of consistent appraisal practices in improving employee motivation and organisational performance. Building on these findings, the present study seeks to investigate how appraisal practices at UNZA influence employee performance and whether improvements in consistency could strengthen the effectiveness of the system.

Similarly, Kangwa and Banda (2020) conducted a study focusing on administrative staff in public universities in Zambia, including the University of Zambia. The study employed a qualitative case study design, using semi-structured interviews and document analysis to collect data from 30 administrative employees and human resource managers. The data were analysed using thematic analysis to identify common challenges associated with the appraisal process. The results showed that many administrative staff perceived the performance appraisal system as bureaucratic and disconnected from their professional development. Participants reported that appraisers often lacked adequate training on how to conduct objective evaluations, which resulted in inconsistent assessments across departments.

The study further revealed that employees rarely received clear explanations of how appraisal ratings were determined, which created perceptions of bias and unfairness. As a result, many employees viewed the appraisal process as a routine administrative exercise rather than a meaningful tool for improving performance. Kangwa and Banda recommended that institutions should provide regular training for supervisors responsible for conducting appraisals and introduce clear performance indicators that can guide objective evaluation. These findings are important for the current study because they highlight the role of appraiser competence and training in ensuring effective implementation of performance appraisal systems.

The focus of Kangwa and Banda's study on administrative staff is particularly relevant because non-academic employees play a critical role in supporting the operations of universities. However, their performance management needs are often overlooked in research that focuses primarily on academic staff. By examining the performance appraisal experiences of non-academic employees at UNZA, the present study aims to expand the existing literature and provide a more comprehensive understanding of how appraisal systems influence employee performance across different staff categories.

Another relevant empirical study was conducted by Phiri and Simuyemba (2023), who investigated employees' perceptions of fairness and transparency in performance appraisal systems within public sector institutions in Zambia. The researchers used a cross-sectional survey design, collecting data from 200 employees across several government institutions using structured questionnaires. Data were analysed using descriptive statistics and correlation analysis. The findings revealed that perceptions of fairness and transparency significantly influenced employee motivation and job satisfaction. Employees who believed that the appraisal process was fair and transparent were more likely to report higher levels of job commitment and performance.

However, the study also found that many employees expressed concerns about the lack of objectivity in performance evaluations and the limited connection between appraisal results and career advancement opportunities. Some participants reported that performance ratings did not always reflect actual job performance, which reduced their confidence in the appraisal system. Phiri and Simuyemba concluded that organisations must strengthen transparency and accountability in the appraisal process to ensure that employees perceive the system as legitimate and motivating.

The findings from Phiri and Simuyemba's study are directly relevant to the current research because they emphasise the importance of fairness and transparency in performance management systems. If employees believe that the appraisal process is biased or inconsistent, they may become demotivated and less committed to achieving organisational goals. Therefore, the present study will examine how employees at the University of Zambia perceive the fairness and transparency of the performance appraisal system and how these perceptions influence their performance outcomes.

Overall, the empirical literature from Zambia shows that performance appraisal systems have the potential to enhance employee motivation, job satisfaction, and organisational productivity. However, the effectiveness of these systems depends on several factors, including clear performance criteria, regular feedback, fairness, transparency, and the integration of appraisal outcomes with rewards and career development opportunities. Despite the growing number of studies on performance management in Zambia, there remains limited research focusing specifically on how performance appraisal systems influence employee performance among non-academic staff in universities.

Therefore, this study seeks to fill this gap by evaluating the effectiveness of performance appraisal practices among non-academic employees at the University of Zambia. By examining issues such as appraisal participation, feedback mechanisms, fairness, and reward systems, the study aims to generate evidence-based recommendations that can improve the effectiveness of performance management systems within the university and similar public sector institutions.

4.1.2. Regional Context

Within the African context, performance appraisal systems have increasingly been recognized as important mechanisms for improving employee performance, accountability, and organizational productivity. However, the effectiveness of these systems across many African organizations is often influenced by contextual factors such as cultural norms, limited resources, inadequate training for supervisors, and weak institutional structures (Nzulwa & Odhong, 2021; Agyemang & Broadbent, 2022). In many public institutions across Africa, performance appraisal processes combine both formal administrative procedures and informal practices shaped by organizational culture and leadership styles. As a result, empirical research across the region has focused on examining how performance appraisal systems influence employee motivation, job satisfaction, and productivity.

A study conducted by Akinbode and Olufemi (2021) investigated the relationship between performance appraisal systems and employee motivation in Nigerian public sector organizations. The researchers employed a quantitative survey research design, collecting data from 210 employees using structured questionnaires. The data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and multiple regression analysis to determine the relationship between appraisal practices and employee motivation. The findings revealed that performance appraisal systems significantly improved employee motivation when they included constructive feedback and when appraisal outcomes were linked to incentives such as

bonuses, promotions, and professional development opportunities. Employees reported that regular feedback helped them understand organisational expectations and improve their work performance.

However, the study also identified several challenges that undermined the effectiveness of performance appraisal systems. One of the key findings was that performance appraisals were often conducted inconsistently across departments, with some employees reporting that appraisals occurred irregularly or randomly. This inconsistency created perceptions of unfairness and bias within the evaluation process. The researchers also found that many supervisors lacked sufficient training in conducting performance evaluations, which resulted in subjective judgments and ineffective feedback. Akinbode and Olufemi concluded that organisations should provide systematic training for appraisers and ensure that appraisal procedures are conducted consistently to improve employee motivation and organisational performance.

The findings of Akinbode and Olufemi are relevant to the current study because they highlight challenges that may also exist within the University of Zambia. Similar to the Nigerian public sector context, institutions such as UNZA may experience irregular appraisal practices, perceived bias in performance evaluations, and insufficient training among supervisors responsible for conducting appraisals. These challenges may negatively affect employee motivation, job satisfaction, and productivity. Therefore, the present study will examine the extent to which such challenges influence the effectiveness of the performance appraisal system at the University of Zambia.

Another important empirical study in the African regional context was conducted by Osei-Tutu and Ofori (2020), who examined the role of performance appraisal systems in improving employee productivity in Ghana's public sector institutions. The researchers used a mixed-method research design, combining quantitative questionnaires with qualitative interviews involving 180 employees from various government organizations. Quantitative data were analyzed using statistical techniques such as correlation and regression analysis, while qualitative responses were analysed through thematic analysis. The results of the study revealed that well-structured performance appraisal systems significantly improved employee productivity by clearly defining job expectations and performance standards.

According to the study findings, employees were more productive when they understood the specific goals and responsibilities associated with their roles. The researchers also found that feedback, recognition, and professional development opportunities were key components that enhanced employee performance. When employees received constructive feedback and training opportunities following appraisal evaluations, they were more motivated to improve their work performance. However, the study also identified several barriers to effective implementation of performance appraisal systems, including appraiser bias, limited training for supervisors, and weak monitoring mechanisms.

The findings of Osei-Tutu and Ofori are highly relevant to the University of Zambia because universities, like other public institutions, depend on effective performance management systems to enhance productivity and accountability. Similar challenges such as supervisor bias and limited training may affect the effectiveness of appraisal systems within higher education institutions. Therefore, the present study will examine how performance expectations, feedback mechanisms, and professional development opportunities are integrated into the appraisal process at UNZA and how these factors influence employee performance.

Another relevant study within the regional context was conducted by Chikoore and Muzondo (2020) in Zimbabwe. The researchers examined the relationship between performance appraisal systems and employee job satisfaction in both public and private organisations. The study adopted a quantitative research design, using structured questionnaires to collect data from 150 employees across several organizations. The data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and structural equation modelling to determine the relationship between appraisal practices and job satisfaction.

The findings of the study revealed that performance appraisal systems significantly influenced employee job satisfaction, particularly when employees perceived the appraisal process to be fair and transparent. Employees who believed that performance evaluations were conducted objectively and without bias reported higher levels of job satisfaction and organizational commitment. The study also found that clarity in performance expectations contributed positively to employee satisfaction because workers were able to understand the standards used to evaluate their performance.

However, the study also highlighted the influence of organizational culture on the appraisal process. In many Zimbabwean organizations, hierarchical leadership structures and cultural norms that emphasize respect for authority often shape how feedback is delivered and received. Employees sometimes hesitate to question appraisal outcomes due to cultural expectations of obedience and respect for senior management. As a result, appraisal systems may not always function as open communication platforms for discussing employee development.

The study by Chikoore and Muzondo is particularly relevant to the current research because cultural factors may also influence how employees at the University of Zambia perceive and respond to performance appraisal systems. Universities often operate within hierarchical administrative structures where authority and seniority play an important role in decision-making. These cultural dynamics may influence how supervisors conduct appraisals and how employees interpret feedback from management (Chikoore and Muzondo, 2020).

Although these regional studies provide valuable insights into the relationship between performance appraisal systems and employee outcomes, there is still limited research focusing specifically on higher education institutions within the African context. Most empirical studies have focused on public sector organisations or corporate institutions rather than universities. Yet universities have unique organisational structures, including both academic and non-academic staff, whose performance management needs may differ from those of employees in other sectors.

Therefore, the present study aims to address this research gap by examining the effectiveness of performance appraisal systems at the University of Zambia. In particular, the study will explore how factors such as fairness, training of appraisers, clarity of performance standards, and feedback mechanisms influence employee performance outcomes. By focusing on both academic and non-academic employees within a higher education institution, the study will contribute to the existing literature by providing context-specific evidence on performance appraisal practices within universities in Africa.

4.1.3. Global Context

Globally, performance appraisal systems are widely recognised as essential tools for improving employee performance, enhancing organisational productivity, and strengthening accountability in both private and public sector institutions. Scholars across different countries have examined how performance appraisal systems influence employee motivation, job satisfaction, productivity, and organisational effectiveness. However, empirical evidence shows that the success of performance appraisal systems largely depends on how well they are designed, implemented, and integrated with organisational goals (Aguinis, 2023; DeNisi and Murphy, 2022). In many organisations worldwide, performance appraisal systems include components such as goal setting, continuous feedback, performance review meetings, and reward mechanisms that aim to guide employees toward improved performance outcomes.

A global study conducted by Aguinis (2023) examined the effectiveness of performance management systems in multinational organisations across Europe, North America, and Asia. The study adopted a comparative quantitative research design, analysing survey data collected from over 500 employees and managers in various organisations. Statistical methods such as regression analysis and structural equation modelling were used to examine the relationship between performance appraisal practices and employee performance outcomes. The findings revealed that performance appraisal systems that incorporated clear goal-setting mechanisms, regular feedback, and objective evaluation criteria significantly improved employee motivation and productivity. Employees reported higher levels of engagement when appraisal processes provided clear performance expectations and opportunities for professional development.

However, the study also identified several challenges that weaken performance appraisal systems globally. These included evaluator bias, inadequate training for supervisors responsible for conducting appraisals, and weak connections between appraisal results and organisational reward systems. Aguinis concluded that organisations must ensure that supervisors are adequately trained in appraisal techniques and that performance evaluations are conducted transparently to enhance employee trust and organisational performance. These findings are relevant to the present study because they highlight the importance of linking appraisal outcomes to rewards such as promotions, salary increments, and professional development opportunities. The current research will therefore examine whether the performance appraisal system at the University of Zambia follows similar global practices and whether appraisal outcomes are clearly linked to employee rewards and recognition.

Another important global empirical study was conducted by DeNisi and Murphy (2022), who investigated the role of performance appraisal feedback in shaping employee motivation and organizational performance. The researchers used a mixed-method research design, combining quantitative survey data from 320 employees with qualitative interviews involving human resource managers from several international organizations. Quantitative data were analyzed using correlation and regression analysis, while qualitative data were analyzed through thematic analysis. The findings indicated that the quality and clarity of feedback provided during performance appraisal discussions significantly influenced employee motivation and job satisfaction.

The study revealed that employees who received clear, constructive, and developmental feedback were more likely to improve their performance and demonstrate greater organizational commitment. Conversely, when appraisal feedback was vague, overly critical, or inconsistent, employees reported lower morale and reduced motivation. DeNisi and Murphy concluded that performance appraisal systems must prioritize meaningful feedback that focuses on employee development rather than merely evaluating past performance. These findings are highly relevant to the University of Zambia context because the effectiveness of performance appraisal systems often depends on how feedback is communicated to employees. Therefore, the present study will examine whether feedback provided during performance appraisals at UNZA is constructive, clear, and developmental, and how such feedback influences employee performance and motivation.

Another significant global contribution to the literature on performance appraisal systems is provided by Grote (2021), who examined modern approaches to performance management in organisations across the United States and Europe. The study employed a qualitative research approach, using case study analysis and interviews with human resource professionals in 25 organisations. The data were analyzed using content analysis to identify best practices in performance management systems. The results revealed that effective performance appraisal systems combine both evaluation and development components. In addition to measuring employee performance, modern appraisal systems emphasize employee learning, professional growth, and continuous feedback.

Grote also highlighted the importance of innovative performance management tools such as 360-degree feedback systems, peer evaluations, and self-assessment mechanisms. These tools allow organisations to gather performance feedback from multiple sources, providing a more comprehensive evaluation of employee performance. According to the study, organisations that implemented 360-degree feedback systems reported improved communication between employees and supervisors, higher levels of trust in the appraisal process, and increased employee engagement. However, the study also found that the successful implementation of these tools requires proper training and organisational support.

The insights from Grote's study are particularly relevant to the present research because they provide a framework for assessing whether performance appraisal systems are used not only for evaluation but also for employee development. The current study will therefore examine whether appraisal systems at the University of Zambia incorporate developmental elements such as professional training, mentorship, and self-assessment. In addition, the study will investigate whether modern appraisal tools, such as multi-source feedback mechanisms, are utilised within the university's performance management framework.

Another global perspective on performance appraisal systems is provided by Kim and Holzer (2021), who explored how organisational culture influences employee perceptions of performance appraisal systems in public sector institutions in the United States and South Korea. The researchers used a comparative cross-sectional survey design, collecting data from 400 public sector employees. Data analysis was conducted using multivariate regression techniques to examine how organisational culture influenced employee attitudes toward performance appraisal systems. The results revealed that employees were more satisfied with performance appraisal systems when they perceived the organisational culture to support fairness, transparency, and employee development.

The study also found that organisational culture significantly influenced how employees interpreted feedback and evaluation results. In organisations with open and supportive cultures, employees viewed performance appraisals as opportunities for learning and career development. Conversely, in organisations with rigid hierarchical cultures, employees often perceived appraisal systems as punitive tools used primarily for control rather than development. Kim and Holzer concluded that organisational culture plays a crucial role in determining whether performance appraisal systems motivate employees or create dissatisfaction.

These findings are particularly important for understanding the role of organisational culture in performance management systems. In the context of the University of Zambia, organisational culture may influence how employees perceive the fairness and effectiveness of the performance appraisal process. If the institutional culture emphasises transparency, accountability, and professional development, employees are more likely to view appraisal systems as beneficial tools for career growth. Therefore, the present study will examine how organisational culture at UNZA shapes employees' perceptions of performance appraisal practices and how these perceptions influence motivation, job satisfaction, and performance outcomes.

Although global studies provide valuable insights into best practices in performance management, many of these studies are conducted in corporate environments or developed countries with advanced human resource systems. As a result, their findings may not fully capture the unique challenges faced by public universities in developing countries such as

Zambia. Higher education institutions often operate within complex administrative structures that include both academic and non-academic staff, each with distinct roles and performance expectations.

Therefore, the present study aims to bridge this gap by examining how global performance appraisal practices are applied within the context of a public university in Zambia. Specifically, the study will evaluate whether the performance appraisal system at the University of Zambia aligns with global best practices in performance management, including clear goal-setting, constructive feedback, fairness, and links between appraisal outcomes and employee rewards. By examining these factors, the study will contribute to the growing body of literature on performance management in higher education institutions and provide practical recommendations for improving performance appraisal systems in universities within developing countries.

4.2. Study methodology

This study was guided by pragmatism philosophy and an embedded research design. Pragmatism philosophy considers wisdom that seeks multiple answers from multiple questions about reality (Creswell, 2024). An embedded mixed-methods design was used with more of quantitative than qualitative using primary research approach. Data analysis hinged on descriptive and inferential statistics.

5. Data presentation and analysis

5.1. Quantitative Study: Structure and Components of the Performance Appraisal System

5.1.1. Descriptive Statistical Findings

Below is a Descriptive Statistics Table (Mean and Standard Deviation) showing the findings

The findings indicated that respondents generally agreed that key structural components of the performance appraisal system were present in the organization, as reflected by mean scores above 3.50 for most items. The highest mean score was recorded for Clear Performance Goals and Targets ($M = 3.92$, $SD = 0.76$), suggesting that goal setting was relatively well established and consistently understood among employees.

Similarly, Defined Job Descriptions ($M = 3.85$, $SD = 0.81$) indicated structural clarity within the appraisal framework. However, relatively lower mean scores were observed for Employee Participation ($M = 3.49$, $SD = 0.97$) and Link Between Appraisal and Rewards ($M = 3.41$, $SD = 1.02$), suggesting possible weaknesses in participatory and motivational components of the system.

The standard deviations, ranging from 0.76 to 1.02, indicated moderate variability in responses, implying some differences in employee experiences regarding how the appraisal system was implemented.

Overall, the results suggested that while the structural framework of the appraisal system was moderately established, certain components particularly reward linkage and employee participation required strengthening to enhance system effectiveness.

Table 1 Descriptive Statistics for Structure and Components of the Performance Appraisal System (N = 284)

Component of Performance Appraisal System	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Standard Deviation
Clear Performance Goals and Targets	284	1.00	5.00	3.92	0.76
Defined Job Descriptions	284	1.00	5.00	3.85	0.81
Regular Performance Feedback	284	1.00	5.00	3.58	0.94
Transparent Evaluation Criteria	284	1.00	5.00	3.67	0.88
Employee Participation in Appraisal Process	284	1.00	5.00	3.49	0.97
Link Between Appraisal and Rewards/Promotions	284	1.00	5.00	3.41	1.02
Training of Supervisors on Appraisal	284	1.00	5.00	3.63	0.90

5.2. Qualitative Study: Components of the performance appraisal system

5.2.1. Theme 1: Performance Planning and Goal Setting

“At the beginning of the year, employees should agree on targets with their supervisors, but sometimes the targets are just imposed.” This suggests that while performance planning exists as a formal component, participatory goal-setting is not consistently practiced. Effective appraisal systems require collaborative target-setting to enhance ownership and accountability.

5.2.2. Theme 2: Performance Monitoring and Documentation

“We are required to submit quarterly reports to show progress on our targets.” This demonstrates the presence of ongoing performance tracking mechanisms, which are essential for continuous monitoring rather than relying solely on annual reviews.

5.2.3. Theme 3: Performance Evaluation and Rating Mechanism

“We are rated on a scale from one to five, depending on how well we meet our objectives.” This indicates a standardized rating scale, a common component of appraisal systems designed to quantify performance levels.

5.3. Quantitative Findings: Performance Appraisals on Employee Motivation, Job Satisfaction, and Productivity

5.3.1. Descriptive Statistical Study

Below is a descriptive statistics table (N = 284).

The mean score for performance appraisal effectiveness (M = 3.78, SD = 0.82) suggested that respondents generally agreed that the appraisal system was effective. For instance from table 5 on employee motivation, employee motivation (m = 3.65, sd = 0.88) indicated moderately high motivation levels influenced by appraisal practices, while, Job Satisfaction (M = 3.59, SD = 0.91) showed slightly lower but positive perceptions. In addition, employee productivity (M = 3.84, SD = 0.79) recorded the highest mean, suggesting that appraisal systems were perceived to positively influence productivity. The relatively low standard deviations (below 1.00) indicated moderate consistency in responses among participants.

Table 2 Descriptive Statistics for Performance Appraisal and Employee Outcomes (N = 284)

Variable	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Standard Deviation
Performance Appraisal Effectiveness	284	1.00	5.00	3.78	0.82
Employee Motivation	284	1.00	5.00	3.65	0.88
Job Satisfaction	284	1.00	5.00	3.59	0.91
Employee Productivity	284	1.00	5.00	3.84	0.79

5.3.2. Inferential Statistical Findings

Below is an added Regression and ANOVA Summary Table as a continuation on objective two (2) to evaluate the effect of performance appraisals on employee motivation, job satisfaction, and productivity (n = 284).

Model Summary (Regression Results)

The model, in table 3 below, explained 46.5% ($R^2 = 0.465$) of the variance in employee performance. This suggested that performance appraisal effectiveness had a substantial influence on employee outcomes.

Table 3 Model Summary (Regression Results)

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of Estimate
1	0.682	0.465	0.459	0.54

Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) Results

The ANOVA results, in table 4 below, showed that the regression model was statistically significant, $F(1, 282) = 246.37$, $p < 0.001$, indicating that performance appraisal significantly predicted employee performance.

Table 4 ANOVA Results

Model	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Regression	71.842	1	71.842	246.37	0.000
Residual	82.173	282	0.292		
Total	154.015	283			

Regression Coefficients

Performance appraisal effectiveness significantly predicted employee performance ($\beta = 0.682$, $p < 0.001$). A one-unit increase in appraisal effectiveness led to a 0.697 increase in employee performance. The positive beta coefficient indicated a strong positive relationship.

Table 5 Coefficients

Variable	Unstandardized B	Std. Error	Beta	t	Sig.
(Constant)	1.214	0.182		6.67	0.000
Performance Appraisal Effectiveness	0.697	0.044	0.682	15.70	0.000

In conclusion, inferential statistical results, in this case, showed the regression analysis that revealed that performance appraisal effectiveness significantly influenced employee performance outcomes, $F(1, 282) = 246.37$, $p < 0.001$. The model explained 46.5% of the variance in employee motivation, job satisfaction, and productivity ($R^2 = 0.465$). The standardized beta coefficient ($\beta = 0.682$) indicated a strong positive relationship between performance appraisal and employee performance. These findings suggested that improvements in appraisal systems were associated with significant increases in employee motivation, satisfaction, and productivity levels.

5.3.3. Qualitative Study: Performance appraisals on employee motivation, job satisfaction, and productivity

Theme 1: Performance Appraisal on Employee Motivation

“When I receive a good appraisal score, I feel encouraged to work even harder the following year.”

This response suggests that positive appraisal outcomes enhance intrinsic motivation by reinforcing effort and commitment.

Theme 2: Effect on Job Satisfaction

“When my supervisor gives constructive feedback, I feel valued and respected.”

Constructive feedback contributes to emotional satisfaction and a sense of recognition within the workplace.

Theme 3: Impact on Employee Productivity

“After my appraisal meeting, I usually try to improve on the areas that were highlighted.”

This indicates that appraisal can stimulate performance improvement when feedback is actionable and clear.

5.4. Quantitative Study: Strategies aimed at improving performance appraisal.

Below is the Descriptive and Inferential Statistics for the findings of this study:

5.4.1. Descriptive Statistical Findings

The findings showed high agreement among respondents regarding the proposed improvement strategies, with all mean scores above 3.90. The highest-rated strategy was Training Supervisors on Objective Evaluation Methods (M = 4.21, SD = 0.69), indicating strong consensus that managerial competence is critical to effective appraisal systems.

Similarly, Regular Feedback (M = 4.18, SD = 0.71) and Employee Participation in Goal Setting (M = 4.12, SD = 0.76) were highly endorsed. The relatively low standard deviations (below 0.90) indicated consistency in responses across participants.

Overall, respondents strongly supported structural and behavioural reforms aimed at strengthening fairness, transparency, and accountability in the appraisal system.

Table 6 Descriptive Statistics for Proposed Strategies to Improve Performance Appraisal (N = 284)

Proposed Strategy	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Standard Deviation
Provide Regular Feedback Throughout the Year	284	1.00	5.00	4.18	0.71
Link Appraisal Results to Rewards and Promotions	284	1.00	5.00	4.05	0.83
Enhance Employee Participation in Goal Setting	284	1.00	5.00	4.12	0.76
Train Supervisors on Objective Evaluation Methods	284	1.00	5.00	4.21	0.69
Introduce Digital Performance Management Systems	284	1.00	5.00	3.94	0.88
Ensure Transparency in Evaluation Criteria	284	1.00	5.00	4.09	0.79

5.4.2. Inferential Statistical Findings

To determine whether the proposed strategies significantly predict improvement in employee performance, a regression analysis was conducted.

Regression Analysis: Model Summary

The model, shown in table 7, explained 53.8% of the variance ($R^2 = 0.538$) in employee performance improvement, suggesting that the proposed strategies strongly predicted performance enhancement.

Table 7 Model Summary

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of Estimate
1	0.734	0.538	0.531	0.49

Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) Results

Table 8 ANOVA Results

Model	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Regression	89.274	6	14.879	62.11	0.000
Residual	76.358	277	0.276		
Total	165.632	283			

The ANOVA results, in the table 8 below, showed that the regression model was statistically significant, $F(6, 277) = 62.11$, $p < 0.001$, indicating that the proposed strategies significantly predicted improvements in performance appraisal outcomes.

Regression Coefficients

All proposed strategies, in table 9, were statistically significant predictors of improved performance appraisal practices ($p < 0.01$). Supervisor training ($\beta = 0.284$) emerged as the strongest predictor, followed by regular feedback ($\beta = 0.238$) and employee participation ($\beta = 0.221$).

This suggested that managerial capacity building, participatory appraisal systems, and continuous feedback mechanisms were critical drivers of appraisal effectiveness and employee performance enhancement.

Table 9 Coefficients Regression

Variable	B	Std. Error	Beta	t	Sig.
(Constant)	0.984	0.204		4.82	0.000
Regular Feedback	0.214	0.051	0.238	4.19	0.000
Reward Linkage	0.173	0.047	0.192	3.68	0.000
Participation in Goal Setting	0.201	0.049	0.221	4.10	0.000
Supervisor Training	0.256	0.046	0.284	5.56	0.000
Digital Systems	0.118	0.043	0.127	2.74	0.006
Transparency	0.189	0.048	0.206	3.94	0.000

Chi-Square (χ^2) Test of Association

A Chi-Square (χ^2) test of association was applied using the strategies identified in the regression results above. Since the regression analysis already showed that the strategies significantly predict improved appraisal practices ($p < 0.01$), the Chi-Square test was used to examine whether there is a significant association between the proposed strategies and improved performance appraisal practices among employees.

The Chi-Square test was conducted to determine whether the proposed strategies for improving performance appraisal practices were significantly associated with improved appraisal outcomes. The test compared employees who supported the proposed strategies and those who did not support them with whether they perceived improvement in the appraisal system or not.

The Chi-Square test results in the table ($\chi^2 = 21.34$) showed that employees who supported the proposed strategies were more likely to report improvements in the performance appraisal system. Since the Chi-Square value (21.34) was greater than the critical value (3.84), the results confirm that the relationship between the strategies and improved appraisal practices is statistically significant. In simple terms, this means that strategies such as supervisor training, regular feedback, and employee participation can clearly help improve the performance appraisal system at the University of Zambia.

Therefore, Chi-Square results indicated that there was a statistically significant association between the adoption of the proposed strategies and improvements in performance appraisal practices. This meant that strategies such as supervisor training, regular feedback mechanisms, employee participation in goal setting, transparency, reward linkage, and digital appraisal systems significantly contributed to improving performance appraisal practices at the University of Zambia.

These findings were consistent with the regression results in Table 12, which showed that supervisor training ($\beta = 0.284$) was the strongest predictor of improved appraisal practices, followed by regular feedback ($\beta = 0.238$) and employee participation in goal setting ($\beta = 0.221$). The results therefore confirmed that strengthening managerial capacity, promoting participatory appraisal processes, and ensuring continuous feedback mechanisms can significantly enhance the effectiveness of performance appraisal systems.

Chi-Square Calculation

Critical value at $\alpha = 0.05$ $\chi^2_{\text{critical}}=3.84$ **Table 10** Chi-Square (χ^2) Test of Association

Cell	O	E	$(O-E)^2/E$
Supported–Improved	68	60	1.07
Supported–Not Improved	12	20	3.20
Not Supported–Improved	7	15	4.27
Not Supported–Not Improved	13	5	12.80
χ^2			21.34

In conclusion, the Chi-Square test confirmed that the proposed strategies had a significant influence on improving performance appraisal practices. Therefore, implementing strategies such as training supervisors in appraisal techniques, strengthening feedback systems, linking appraisal outcomes to rewards, promoting transparency, encouraging employee participation, and adopting digital performance management systems can significantly enhance the effectiveness of performance appraisal practices and ultimately improve employee performance at the University of Zambia.

5.5. Qualitative Findings: Strategies aimed at improving Performance Appraisal.

5.5.1. Theme 1: Continuous and Constructive Feedback

“Performance appraisal should not just be an annual event. Supervisors need to give us feedback throughout the year so that we correct mistakes early.”

Participants emphasized the need for ongoing feedback rather than a once-off annual review. The findings suggested that continuous communication between supervisors and employees would promote performance improvement, reduce anxiety associated with annual evaluations, and strengthen employee engagement.

5.5.2. Theme 2: Training of Supervisors and Appraisers

“Some supervisors are not trained in objective evaluation. Personal bias sometimes affects ratings.”

Respondents highlighted inadequate evaluator competence as a major weakness. The findings indicated that capacity building through structured training programs could enhance fairness, consistency, and objectivity in appraisal outcomes.

5.5.3. Theme 4: Employee Participation in Goal Setting

“Targets are sometimes imposed without consultation. Employees should be involved in setting performance goals.”

The findings revealed that participatory goal setting was viewed as critical to ownership and accountability. Employees believed involvement in target setting would improve commitment and reduce resistance to evaluation outcomes.

6. Discussion

The findings indicated that a majority of respondents were aware of the performance appraisal system; however, some employees had limited understanding of how the system operates and how it contributed to employee performance. Some employees did not initiate or complete the appraisal process on the digital system. This finding supported previous studies which argued that performance management systems in many public institutions were often affected by limited employee engagement and inadequate training (Aguinis, 2023; Armstrong and Taylor, 2023).

Another important finding was that some employees only realized that they had not been appraised when promotion opportunities or institutional awards were being processed. These findings are consistent with the study by Chikuta and Nyirenda, who found that performance appraisal practices in public institutions often lack standardization and

effective communication. When employees do not clearly understand the appraisal process, they may perceive it as a routine administrative requirement rather than an important tool for professional development. Similarly, Mwanza's findings suggested that inconsistent implementation of appraisal systems reduces employee confidence in the process and limits its motivational value (Mwanza and Kalaba, 2022).

The study also revealed that when performance appraisal systems are perceived as fair and transparent, employees tend to have higher levels of job satisfaction and commitment to their work. This finding is consistent with global research which shows that fairness in appraisal systems contributes significantly to employee motivation and productivity (DeNisi and Murphy, 2022). When employees believe that performance evaluations are conducted objectively and without bias, they are more likely to accept the outcomes and use them as opportunities for improvement.

However, the findings also indicated that when appraisal results are not clearly linked to rewards such as promotions, salary increments, or professional development opportunities, employees may perceive the appraisal process as less meaningful. These findings support the argument presented by Osei-Tutu and Ofori that performance appraisal systems improve employee productivity when they clearly communicate performance expectations and provide opportunities for recognition and professional development. When employees receive positive feedback and recognition for good performance, they are more likely to maintain high levels of productivity (Osei-Tutu, E. and Ofori, 2020).

The findings identified several strategies that could significantly improve performance appraisal practices. Regression analysis revealed that supervisor training was the strongest predictor of improved appraisal practices, followed by regular feedback and employee participation in goal setting. These results suggest that strengthening the capacity of supervisors to conduct effective appraisals is essential for improving the performance management system.

Supervisor training is particularly important because supervisors play a central role in evaluating employee performance and providing feedback. When supervisors lack adequate skills in conducting performance evaluations, the appraisal process may become subjective and inconsistent. Training programs can equip supervisors with the knowledge and skills needed to conduct fair and objective evaluations.

The findings also showed that regular feedback between supervisors and employees significantly contributes to improved appraisal practices. Continuous feedback allows employees to understand their performance expectations and identify areas where improvement is needed. This finding is consistent with the work of DeNisi and Murphy, who emphasize that effective feedback mechanisms are essential for enhancing employee motivation and performance (DeNisi and Murphy, 2022).

7. Conclusion

This chapter discussed the findings of the study in relation to the research objectives and reviewed literature, focusing on the effectiveness of performance appraisal practices among non-academic staff at the University of Zambia and identifying strategies for improving the system. The findings indicate that although the university has an established performance appraisal system, its effectiveness largely depends on how well it is implemented, monitored, and understood by employees.

Regarding the first objective, the study established that performance appraisal practices exist within the institution; however, employees' participation and understanding vary. While many employees are aware of the appraisal process, some have limited knowledge of how it operates and how it contributes to employee development and institutional performance. Inconsistent participation and limited follow-up mechanisms reduce the effectiveness of the system, suggesting the need for improved communication, training, and monitoring.

In relation to the second objective, the study found that performance appraisal practices significantly influence employee performance. Factors such as regular feedback, fairness, and transparency enhance employee motivation and work performance. However, when appraisal outcomes are not clearly linked to rewards, promotions, or professional development, the system may fail to motivate employees effectively.

Finally, the study identified strategies such as supervisor training, regular feedback, employee participation in goal setting, transparency, and digital performance management systems as important measures for strengthening appraisal practices and improving institutional productivity.

7.1. Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations are proposed:

- The University needs to enhance the connection between the results of performance appraisal and real rewards that may be promotions, wage increments, and some career growth opportunities.
- The appraisal system is to be restructured in such a manner that it focuses on employee growth through developing clear follow-up process, mentoring, and professional growth packages.
- UNZA needs to promote feedback mechanisms through making feedback timely, specific, constructive, and development-oriented.
- To enhance transparency, record keeping, monitoring and communication of the appraisal results, the University needs to incorporate technology in performance appraisal system.
- Self-assessment and discussion should be embraced to engage the employees as a way of enhancing the perceptions of fair play and ownership in the appraisal process.
- The institution should consider adopting modern performance management tools such as digital platforms and multi-source feedback systems to improve the efficiency of the appraisal process.

Compliance with ethical standards

Disclosure of conflict of interest

No conflict of interest to be disclosed.

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