



A Systematic Review Search on Employee Performance Appraisal within Health Care Organizations

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Abstract

Performance appraisal plays a vital role in recognizing the strengths and areas for improvement of the workforce, assessing their training requirements, and establishing a fair compensation framework. This research focused on exploring multiple facets of employee performance appraisal specifically within the healthcare sector. The literature search targeted major databases including Web of Science, PubMed, and Scopus, covering publications from 2000 to 2019. The study selection process involved three phases: initially reviewing titles to exclude irrelevant studies, followed by abstract screening, and finally conducting a full-text evaluation. From an initial pool of 8,022 articles, only 11 met the inclusion criteria. According to the reviewed studies, key aspects of employee performance appraisal in healthcare organizations encompass the objectives behind appraisals, the techniques employed, the criteria used for evaluation, and the ways appraisal outcomes are utilized. Considering the crucial role of human resources in health institutions, it is essential for management to leverage international experiences in order to identify core components for designing an effective performance appraisal system. Additionally, the importance of involving employees actively throughout every stage of the appraisal process was consistently highlighted.

Keywords: Systematic review, Employee, Healthcare organization, Performance appraisal

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Introduction

The role of the workforce in organizational success cannot be overstated, as the outcomes largely hinge on employee performance. In a highly competitive environment, managers are under pressure to elevate organizational productivity, where employees are fundamental to achieving these targets [1]. Human resources represent a vital strategic asset, enabling the effective use of other resources such as capital, technology, processes, and materials [2]. Accordingly, organizations are dedicating substantial resources toward enhancing employee skills and development [3]. The advancement of employee performance is expected to lead to significant improvements within organizations, with enhanced workforce capabilities directly influencing overall effectiveness [4].

Healthcare organizations (HCOs) operate in a context marked by urgency, critical care demands, and information imbalances between providers and patients [5], necessitating a specialized approach to human resource management (HRM). Efficient HRM within health institutions is crucial to ensure the delivery of high-quality, effective services and to secure patient satisfaction [6]. Strategic HRM initiatives are essential for optimizing healthcare delivery and improving system accessibility [7]. Quality public health services rely heavily on robust HRM practices within the health sector [8].



A pivotal yet complex component of HRM is employee performance appraisal (EPA), which is often viewed as one of the most challenging HRM tasks [9]. EPA underpins critical HR activities, including delivering performance feedback, facilitating training programs, and fostering employee growth [10]. When implemented properly, EPA can enhance workforce accountability and responsibility, thereby improving overall performance [11]. It also serves as a self-regulatory tool for employees, contributing to both personal and organizational development [12].

Employee performance appraisal is described as a systematic and formalized process that periodically evaluates the quality of employee work [13]. In healthcare settings, the primary objectives of performance appraisal include monitoring staff performance, increasing motivation, and ultimately enhancing organizational efficiency, which in turn improves patient satisfaction and the performance of the health system as a whole [14]. Additionally, appraisal results provide critical data that support decisions related to recruitment, employee training, development, and recognition of high achievers.

Several performance appraisal methods exist, commonly classified into three categories: confidential appraisals, where employees are excluded from the process and are unaware of their evaluation outcomes; semi-open or semi-secret appraisals, which start transparently but keep final results hidden from employees—for example, where an employee completes an appraisal form, which is then rated by a supervisor and signed without sharing results with the employee; and open appraisals, which are fully transparent, allowing employees to be informed about their strengths and weaknesses and encouraging self-awareness [15]. Other appraisal techniques include essay appraisals, graphic rating scales, checklists, critical incident methods, ranking, management by objectives (MBO), tell-and-sell, tell-and-listen, problem-solving approaches, and 360-degree feedback methods [16].

Modern organizations increasingly link performance appraisal directly to their strategic goals, assessing employees based on their contributions toward achieving organizational objectives [17]. An organization's ability to remain competitive and sustainable largely depends on how effectively it measures and appraises employee contributions relative to these goals [18]. Despite the extensive efforts and financial investments in EPA systems within healthcare, many such systems fail to produce meaningful results [19]. A significant factor in these shortcomings is often the lack of managerial skill. Public sector organizations, including HCOs, frequently operate without effective appraisal systems, leading to issues such as inefficiency and low employee morale [20]. While numerous appraisal models and methods exist, only a few are widely recognized or utilized within healthcare. This study therefore aims to identify the key characteristics, strengths, and weaknesses of EPA systems in HCOs and suggest strategies to address their shortcomings.

Evidence acquisition

To conduct this review, a systematic search was performed across Scopus, PubMed, Web of Science, and Google Scholar databases, applying the search terms: [employee OR staff OR personnel OR human resources OR manpower OR workforce] AND [performance OR function OR productivity] AND [appraisal OR assessment OR evaluation OR monitoring OR management] AND [health OR clinical OR medical OR hospital OR healthcare OR public]. The selection process for relevant studies is detailed in **Figure 1**.

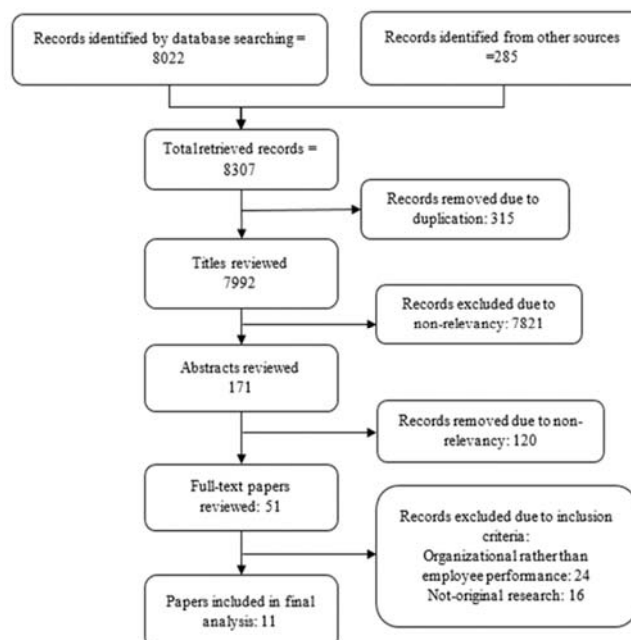


Figure 1. Process of search and selection of paper for review of employee performance appraisal in healthcare organizations

Selection and screening

The process of article selection was conducted in three progressive stages. Initially, only the titles were reviewed, and those unrelated to the study's central inquiry were removed. Following this, the abstracts of the remaining articles were evaluated to determine their alignment with the research focus. Finally, the full-text versions were examined to confirm eligibility. Whenever ambiguity arose regarding a study's suitability, it was carried forward to the next stage for further consideration. Two researchers (AH & EJP) independently reviewed and assessed the selected articles, with any discrepancies referred to a third researcher (AMM) for resolution.

Studies were included if they met the following conditions: written in either English or Persian, published between 2000 and 2019, and addressed the evaluation of employee performance within public or not-for-profit healthcare organizations (HCOs). Additionally, eligible materials encompassed not only research articles but also letters to the editor and commentaries that focused on organizational performance assessments or descriptions of performance appraisal methods, including their respective advantages and drawbacks, even if not directly applied within real-world HCO settings. Due to the exploratory nature of the review, no formal quality appraisal of the selected literature was carried out, as the primary goal was to gather as many relevant sources as possible.

Extraction and synthesis

A structured data extraction tool developed by the researchers was employed to capture essential elements from each selected study. This form collected information on several key aspects, including the stated purpose of performance appraisal, the way this purpose was communicated to employees, specific indicators used to evaluate performance, employees' perspectives on the strengths and limitations of these indicators, scoring methodologies, practical applications of the appraisal results, the various dimensions of EPA, perceived benefits and challenges of the appraisal systems, and suggested improvements to enhance EPA effectiveness.

Once data were extracted, a detailed review and analysis were undertaken based on the categories within the extraction framework. The synthesized results are presented narratively, reflecting the patterns and themes identified across the reviewed studies.

Results and Discussion

An initial database search yielded 8,307 records (**Figure 1**). After eliminating duplicate entries through export filtering, a multi-phase screening process—title, abstract, and full-text review—culminated in the inclusion of 11 relevant studies for final analysis. No additional sources were identified through the grey literature search.

Among the final pool of 11 articles, the majority ($n = 9$, 75%) were published in English, while the remaining were in Persian. Analysis of the content revealed four principal dimensions relevant to employee performance appraisal (**Table 1**).

Table 1. Dimensions of EPA systems

Dimensions	Number of studies
Purposes of performance appraisal	4
Indicators of performance appraisal	10
Methods of performance appraisal	9
Uses of performance appraisal results	8

A synthesis of the findings obtained from the reviewed studies is presented in **Table 2**.

Table 2. Summary of the results of reviewing studies

Dimensions	Paraphrased Summary of Results
Purpose of performance appraisal	Aims include enhancing service quality in HCOs, uplifting employee morale, supervising employee performance, boosting motivation and productivity, determining training requirements, advancing human resources, offering grounds for employee rewards, and promoting both individual and organizational development.
Indicators of performance appraisal	The indicators must be well-defined, dependable, easy to comprehend, quantifiable, applicable to job roles, and communicated directly by supervisors. They should effectively reflect the employee's role in meeting the goals of the organization.

Methods of performance appraisal	Ensuring the appraisal method is valid and reliable is crucial. Evaluators must be aware of both the evaluation process and its focus, ensuring consistency in results even when repeated by others. Employee participation in the appraisal process plays a significant role.
Methods for eliciting feedback and use of the performance appraisal results	Constructive feedback, especially when positive, enhances motivation. Employees need to perceive the feedback as genuine and non-threatening. The outcomes are applicable in compensation decisions, performance tracking, employment actions (such as promotion or termination), training needs analysis, and employee growth. These assessments can guide the formulation of training programs by identifying strengths and weaknesses.

Purposes of EPA

Four of the reviewed studies explored the underlying objectives of performance appraisal [9, 21–23]. According to Choudhary and colleagues, a fundamental aim of EPA is to elevate the standard of care delivered within HCOs [21]. They further highlighted that key drivers for implementing performance appraisal include observing employee performance, increasing motivation, and fostering higher morale among staff [23]. Rolle and Klingner [22] emphasized that a strong EPA system is defined by transparent communication regarding its purpose and the involvement of employees in the appraisal process. Additional objectives cited by Zaboli *et al.* [21] include refining employee performance, identifying areas requiring educational intervention, optimizing human resources, establishing frameworks for employee incentives, and providing training that empowers staff and supports organizational advancement. Roberts [9] noted that employee performance goals, when integrated into EPA, should be clearly defined, sufficiently ambitious to present a challenge, and agreed upon by the employees. Such goal-setting, when combined with EPA, reportedly contributes to greater employee satisfaction.

Indicators of EPA

A majority of the reviewed studies (10 out of 11) addressed the characteristics and structure of EPA indicators. One recurring concern mentioned was the tendency for some indicators to lack relevance to actual job functions or to be poorly defined [22]. However, Vasset *et al.* [24] stressed that indicators should be explicit, measurable, easily understood, and relevant to the employees' roles, while also quantifying the individual's contribution to organizational achievements. Roberts [9] asserted that indicators should reflect essential job duties, ensure balance between workflow and outcomes, and consider both individual and team efforts. Many institutions opt to use a mix of quantitative and qualitative indicators [25]. Three methodological strategies for designing EPA indicators were outlined: those centered on performance, behaviors, and outcomes [23]. Additionally, Zaboli *et al.* [21] proposed using a balanced scorecard approach that encompasses customer perspectives, internal processes, financial aspects, and innovation and learning. Fekete and Rozenberg [26] observed that different criteria may shape these indicators, including personal performance, job-related behavior or attitude, role-specific experience, and overall work history, each potentially weighted differently. Kundo [27] described further dimensions such as: domain expertise; work quality, including accuracy, relevance, and standard adherence; interpersonal communication with clients and colleagues; problem-solving capabilities involving critical thinking and analysis; service orientation for both internal and external stakeholders; collaboration within teams; creativity and initiative; dedication to organizational objectives; inter-personal effectiveness; and financial prudence in utilizing resources. Ranayi and Saqapour [28], referencing the organizational excellence model, outlined nine core and sub-dimensions for assessing employee performance: leadership, strategic direction and policies, human resources, process efficiency, outcomes for employees, utilization of partnerships and assets, customer results, societal impact, and essential performance outcomes. Grigoroudis [29] categorized EPA indicators into four broad themes: Work content (skills, eagerness to learn, quality of deliverables, leadership); Work practice (consistency, trustworthiness, innovation); Work efficiency (timely task execution, stress management, openness to feedback, adaptability); and Quality of work and communication (efforts to enhance the organization's reputation, patient-focused service, interdepartmental cooperation, and interaction with patients).

Methods of EPA

Nine of the reviewed articles addressed aspects related to the methodologies employed in performance appraisal. One significant concern noted by Rolle and Klingner [22] was the ineffectiveness of certain tools, which may introduce evaluator bias during the assessment process. According to them, it is essential that evaluators not only understand what and how to assess but also do so with enough consistency that repeated appraisals by different individuals would yield similar outcomes [22].

Various techniques are currently utilized in conducting EPA. For instance, Musyoka [30] highlighted that peer appraisal is applied in the NHS to evaluate general practitioners. Since colleagues operating at the same level often have direct insights into each other's competencies, this approach is seen as an effective way to identify both strengths and limitations. Choudhary and Puranik [23] described a case in an acute care facility where evaluations extended beyond clinical performance to include behavioral aspects such as mutual respect among employees and adherence to institutional rules, values, and policies.

A more traditional strategy is the top-down appraisal system, where managers rate staff performance using predefined parameters. This is often paired with a self-assessment component in which employees outline their roles and describe the extent to which they've fulfilled their duties. Kundu [27] emphasized that this approach spotlights employee achievements, which must be validated by higher-level supervisors.

Feedback from patients can also be incorporated into EPA. As discussed by Buchelt [25], this method allows service users to evaluate the conduct and professionalism of personnel they've interacted with, including nurses and physicians.

The engagement of employees in the appraisal process plays a pivotal role in its credibility and effectiveness. According to Vasset *et al.* [24], active involvement fosters acceptance of the results and boosts motivation, while a lack of transparency can lead to employee pushback, diminished morale, and unnecessary administrative burdens. Roberts [9] added that for appraisals to be meaningful and trusted, staff must be well-informed about the procedures, align with managerial expectations, and believe in the objectivity of evaluators.

Another essential component is the scoring system used in EPA. Fekete and Rozenberg [26] advocated for open dialogue between employees, supervisors, and managers when discussing performance ratings. Additionally, job-specific appraisal scenarios can be developed that reflect managerial expectations, with scoring criteria weighted based on the employee's department or unit—ensuring the weights sum to 100 for standardized calculation. Grigoroudis and Zopounidis [29] suggested using MCDM techniques like the UTASTAR model to assign appropriate weights to appraisal scores, enabling a more balanced and accurate final evaluation for each employee.

Feedback and uses of the results

A total of eight studies explored how feedback is delivered and how the outcomes of performance appraisal are applied. Delivering feedback to employees regarding their work performance serves as a vital strategy for fostering improvement. When feedback is framed as encouragement or affirmation, it has the potential to boost employee morale and enhance motivation [24]. Such feedback mechanisms often involve sustained mentoring, educational initiatives, and open, constructive dialogues between staff and their supervisors [22]. However, for feedback to have a meaningful impact, it must be perceived as genuine and non-threatening by the recipients [27].

Data gathered from performance appraisal processes are routinely utilized across several human resource functions, including performance tracking, record-keeping, and determining financial compensation [26]. These outcomes further inform critical decisions such as promotion, reassignment, termination, and identifying employee training needs and development pathways [31]. By pinpointing both areas of strength and weakness, the EPA facilitates targeted professional growth. In some settings, such assessments have led to the formulation of formal educational strategies and training programs [25]. These appraisal results are ideally analyzed on an individual basis, with a strong emphasis on communication between supervisors and subordinates. This dialogue may also extend to discussing the challenges employees face in their roles and devising potential solutions [27].

An effective system of feedback is dynamic and tailored, concentrating on observable performance behaviors rather than personal traits. It emphasizes modifiable aspects of performance rather than factors outside the employee's control and remains anchored in clearly defined benchmarks. This structure is designed to prevent defensive reactions among staff [23]. Within a well-functioning EPA system, feedback is provided consistently and in both structured and informal formats. When delivered regularly and appropriately—being timely, specific, relevant, and from credible sources—such feedback enables employees to pursue and achieve predefined objectives [9].

Although Roberts pointed out that EPA is typically conducted on an annual basis and suffers from limitations when done solely in that format, it nonetheless remains central to evaluating and enhancing workplace effectiveness. This review has examined the broader architecture of EPA systems, focusing on their operational dimensions, inherent challenges, and potential improvement strategies in healthcare organizations. When designed and executed properly, EPA can support a broad range of HRM objectives, from workforce development to enhanced feedback and training [32]. Furthermore, it has the potential to increase employee accountability and serve as a foundation for institutional productivity and efficiency [33]. Overall, four principal themes have emerged: the underlying purpose of EPA, its methodologies, the selection of appropriate performance indicators, and how feedback and results are handled.

Despite the various motivations behind implementing EPA systems, the central goal remains the enhancement of institutional performance via improved individual output [23], ultimately contributing to public health improvement [34]. Employees are among the most valuable assets in any healthcare organization, and empirical findings have demonstrated a correlation between the performance of EPA systems and levels of staff motivation [35]. By recognizing employee strengths and deficiencies, EPA assists in the planning of appropriate training initiatives [36].

Clarity in communicating the appraisal's purpose is crucial. Developing employee-specific goals in collaboration with them is essential to foster ownership and alignment [9], echoing principles emphasized by Peter Drucker [37]. Literature suggests that when employees understand the intent and criteria of performance evaluations, their acceptance of the system improves

[38], as also emphasized by Chester Barnard [39]. Additionally, allowing staff to co-create their objectives has been linked to stronger engagement and dedication to performance goals [40].

Regarding the selection of performance indicators, ambiguity must be avoided, as vague metrics create opportunities for subjective interpretation and evaluator bias [22]. Instead, indicators should prioritize quantifiable elements over general or narrative descriptions [25]. Their development should involve employee input and be communicated promptly [24]. Indicators must also demonstrate high sensitivity and specificity to effectively distinguish between differing levels of staff performance [9]. These metrics can be categorized as either specific—relating to individual job duties—or general—linked to the broader institutional mission and initiatives. Specific metrics vary by role, while general ones typically remain consistent across roles. It is recommended that these be weighted appropriately based on the professional position of the employee [41].

To ensure fairness and comprehensive evaluation, performance data should be collected from multiple sources. One important dimension includes assessing how employees collaborate and adhere to organizational norms and ethical standards [23]. Additionally, patient feedback serves as a valuable tool for assessing clinical personnel such as nurses and physicians [25]. However, it is critical to minimize evaluator bias [42, 43] and actively involve employees in the process [9, 24, 25]. Biases—whether overly generous, harsh, or neutral—can distort outcomes and erode trust in the appraisal process [44]. Implementing statistical methods such as the normal distribution curve can help identify and address such inconsistencies in scoring [26]. Another vital consideration is the practical application of EPA results and ensuring that employees receive meaningful feedback. It is important that feedback is balanced and not limited to criticisms [27]. Instead, both accomplishments and areas for improvement should be regularly reviewed in scheduled sessions throughout the year [15]. These discussions should provide employees a safe space to share the challenges they face in fulfilling their duties [45]. Nonetheless, some evidence indicates that organizations occasionally fail to act on EPA findings effectively [46]. Key applications of these results may include internal promotions, determining compensation, and tailoring in-service training programs [47]. Additionally, EPA outcomes can validate recruitment tools and help refine selection processes [48]. With validated hiring mechanisms in place, organizations are better equipped to attract and retain the most suitable candidates [49].

Conclusion

The effectiveness of the EPA process can be significantly enhanced when supervisors actively engage employees in shaping the appraisal framework. One major shortcoming of performance indicators is their broad and often subjective nature, limiting their utility in accurately assessing and differentiating staff performance. A recommended solution is to tailor individual indicators based on the organization's operational plans and detailed job descriptions, developed collaboratively with team members.

Discontent among personnel regarding bias in the appraisal process has been reported in some EPA models. Properly crafted and relevant indicators may help to alleviate such concerns. Typically, feedback is offered only annually in a formal setting, making it challenging for employees to detect and address deficiencies in real-time. Thus, it is advised that, alongside annual formal evaluations, continuous and informal feedback should be provided throughout the year to enable ongoing performance improvement. As noted by Roberts [9], the traditional once-a-year formal EPA is inherently flawed.

Based on the reviewed studies and the identified strengths and limitations of various EPA frameworks, the following strategies are proposed to enhance their efficacy:

- Managers should organize preliminary meetings with staff to articulate their performance expectations clearly, grounded in departmental or unit-specific action plans.
- EPA indicators need frequent revisions by subject-matter experts to align with the evolving diversity of roles within HCOs.
- Indicators should be structured to be specific, objective, quantifiable, and reflective of all facets of the job while accurately identifying both strengths and weaknesses.
- To mitigate bias, supervisors should be trained in recognizing cognitive biases and avoiding counterproductive organizational behavior.
- Performance feedback should be ongoing and not limited to the annual cycle.
- Employee participation should be encouraged at every stage of the EPA process.

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