Performance Assessment in the International Hotel Sector of Yangon, Myanmar

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Abstract: Performance assessment has been a controversial subject in human resource management since its introduction; while managers can see the benefits of conducting such assessments (and how they can benefit both employers and employees), they rarely want to be the ones to conduct them because of the damage that ill-applied measurements can have on the motivation and morale of some employees. However, the practice is of particular importance in the hospitality and hotel sector, since success is so very dependent on the ability and willingness of members of staff at every level to satisfy customer demand. Consequently, performance assessment has been introduced into the hotel sector of Yangon, previously the capital and largest city of Myanmar (Burma). In doing so, it has been the intention to help employees to determine and map their own future career trajectories and to set boundaries for what might be achieved. Yet workers in Myanmar are unaccustomed to being asked their opinions and, given the longstanding societal and political conditions in the country, a number of employees are reluctant to provide full and frank answers to questions from superiors in the workplace. Drawing on a sample of 303 respondents from the hotel sector in Yangon, this paper reports on issues surrounding performance assessment and its impact in that sector.

Keywords: *hotel, human resource management, Myanmar, performance assessment*

1. Introduction

The opening of the Myanmar economy that has accompanied the steps towards democracy in that country has provided business opportunities in manufacturing, resource extraction and tourism. International observers, including the New York Times (Hammer, 2012) and Condé Nast (Larmer, 2012), have been quick to identify the promising tourism sector, particularly in the former capital of Yangon (Rangoon), as one of the most exciting new destinations for international travelers. Yangon is a city that displays many examples of the colonialist and neo-colonialist architectural styles (Preecharushh, 2009:89) but, in recent years, the city, in common with nearly the whole of the country, has suffered from lack of investment under the military junta and aged and unimproved infrastructure and services. Some of the architecturally-important colonial buildings are in a state of virtual collapse and the lack of tourism services means that visitors without local connections have been required mostly to fend for themselves when in the country. Restrictions on investment in the accommodation and hospitality sectors have also meant that there is a significant lack of hotel rooms in the city and those rooms that do exist suffer from variable quality. There is unmet demand for high quality office and hotel space (Katharangsiporn, 2012). Although most current hotel projects have resulted from foreign investment (see Table 1), managers have found it difficult to increase the quality of services offered because of the lack of local supplies, skills and inputs. In particular, repeated interruptions to tertiary level education in Myanmar have meant that few graduates are available to serve in industries aiming to offer internally competitive services (Runckel, 2012). Those graduates who are competent are likely to become part of the drain of migrant workers overseas, with more than one million workers living in neighboring Thailand alone (Chantavanich, 2012). Other workers are employed in the various industrial estates located around the capital city, which also act as a magnet for international customers (Chaw, 2003). Consequently, efforts are being made in the newly-announced era of democracy to step up the internal investment in the hotel sector (Katharangsiporn, 2012), in the context of significant increases in the provision of upscale hotels throughout the Asia-Pacific region (Viboonchart, 2012).

Table 1: Foreign Investment in Hotels and Commercial Complex. Source: Ministry of Hotels and Tourism (2010)

Country	Hotel/Apartments	Investment (US\$ million)
Singapore	12	597.8
Thailand	11	263.3
Japan	6	183.0
Hong Kong	4	77.0
Malaysia	2	20.0
UK	1	3.4
Total	36	1,144.4

One means that hotel managers have to try to improve hotel-based services is through assessment of employee performance. Employee assessment has become a normal part of workplace routines in internationalized business, although it is not always an uncontroversial issue. In an emerging market such as Myanmar, the use of assessment can appear to be an unwarranted imposition on employees, who are often suspicious of the motives of employers because they have faced so many years of oppression and exploitation by the state and so view all organizational relationships in such a light. There have, in other words, been inimical social relations that have become integral to Myanmar society at all levels as a result of the authoritarian political system. To what extent have international managers been able to overcome these problems and create organizational culture within their hotels that incorporates the use of performance appraisal as a means of improving service levels and employee loyalty? This is the central research question considered in this paper. The attempt to answer the question has been addressed through the use of in-depth interviews with leading hotel managers and a quantitative survey of a total of 303 hotel employees. The research question mirrors a larger societal issue: to what extent, generally, will the recent history of the country cause a long-term competitiveness deficit in international activities because of the negative impacts on the people? The paper continues with an exploration of the relevant literature concerning performance assessment in the context of emerging markets. This is followed by a description of the methodology selected to obtain data for analysis, with the analysis of the data then presented. The fifth section relates to recommendations drawn from the results, some suggestions for further research and conclusions drawn from the study as a whole.

2. Literature Review

As part of a high-value service sector, in which success depends to a considerable extent on the quality of the staff, hotel management has for a significant period of time involved extensive examination of the competencies of employees (e.g. Baum, 1990). The management of what have come to be known as human resources in the hotel industry has been intensively investigated (Mullins, 1995), although with only limited success, which is apparent because productivity in the sector remains below average (Witt & Witt, 1989). Within the overall study of management, the review of employee performance and its impact on morale and motivation represents an important sub-sector. This subject, performance assessment, will now be considered.

Performance Assessment: In a complex, contemporary organization, the role of human resources management is increasingly becoming one of the core functions that determine competitiveness and success. This is because the emergence of the information age means that it is human creativity and ability to innovate that often makes the difference between achieving customer satisfaction or not. Finding, attracting, recruiting and retaining important employees have, therefore, become central to the success of the organization. Noe *et al.* (2006) stated that human resource practices include analyzing and designing work, determining human resources needs (planning), attracting potential employees (recruiting), choosing employees (selection), teaching employees how to perform their jobs and preparing them for the future (training and development), rewarding employees (compensation), evaluating their performance (performance management), and creating a positive work environment (employee relations). Performance assessment is an attempt made by employers to determine the level of performance by employees through a suite of objective and subjective tests. If such an assessment is conducted in a non-transparent way or else with ineffective communications,

then there is clearly a possibility for inappropriate behavior as employers succumb to favoritism or worse. Erdogan (2002) observed that performance appraisals have been transformed from performance-monitoring into performance-development tools with three functions: (1) to provide adequate feedback to support employee development, (2) to serve as a basis for modifying or changing behaviours to produce more effective work for organizations and (3) to provide useful information to supervisors. This transformation has taken place because performance appraisals had been perceived as biased and unfair and it is this notion of 'fairness' that has been identified as the most important aspect of employees' responses to them.

Research by Murphy & Cleveland (1995) found that of all the tasks undertaken by human resource managers, performance appraisals are one of the most unpopular among employees. Performance assessment has become considered a necessary but unwanted part of organizational life. Performance appraisal systems are among the most important human resource systems in organizations in so far as they yield critical decisions integral to various human resource actions and outcomes (Jawahar, 2007). Research by Thomas & Bretz (1994) indicated that managers hesitate to give unfavourable appraisals for fear that the appearance of unsatisfactory work by subordinates reflects badly on the manager's ability to select and develop employees. Lack of candour in employee evaluation is one way of "hiding dirty laundry." Although performance assessment supports performance management, it is found that most of the managers do not like performance assessment itself (Brown, Hyatt & Benson, 2010). In general, performance assessment can only really be successfully employed when it takes into account the context of the organizational setting, the external and internal constraints on employee performance and all the other factors that can affect it. A large proportion of the now quite extensive literature on performance assessment concerns its use in the classroom and one of the principal conclusions to be drawn from it is that crude or naïve attempts to compare bottom line results is very likely to produce misleading results (Eisner, 1999).

Review of the Effect of Performance Assessment on Employees' Performance: Given the importance of performance by individuals to operational competitiveness, it is not surprising that many researchers have begun to try to determine means of how to conduct it effectively and unobtrusively. One strand of literature considers the role of specific human resource management practices in promoting performance. Huselid (1995) and Wood & de Menezes (1998) suggested that high commitment human resource practices, such as employee development, affect organizational outcomes by shaping employee behaviours and attitudes. Brown, Hyatt & Benson (2010) observed that employees are sensitive to quality variations in performance appraisal as its processes are a powerful determinant of employees' prospects (e.g. promotion or termination of employment) within the organization. Thayer (1987) suggested performance appraisal quality variations will generate strong reactions among employees. Another strand of the literature aims to consider the impact of performance assessment techniques themselves on final performance. This is an aspect of the observation effect: that is, the fact that a phenomenon is being observed in itself causes some changes. People, being complex and sophisticated creatures capable of non-rational behavior, can react in a number of different ways when they feel they are suffering the impact of the observer effect. For example, Jawahar (2007) noted that several researchers have asserted that appraisal reactions are likely to play a key role in the development of favourable job and organizational attitudes and, also, to enhance motivation to increase performance (Lawler, 1994). Leamon (2006), meanwhile, observed that where there is a typical performance bell curve for a particular key performance indicator, managers may mistakenly spend an inordinate amount of coaching time with high and low performers instead of with the average performers, in the case of which there is a real opportunity to make a positive difference. The top performers are already stars in their own right and do not really need coaching, while the low-performers probably will not improve enough to make a huge impact and might simply be in the wrong job. The benefits of performance management today are developing a culture of high performance and accountability, getting timely and trustworthy performance information and rewarding employees promptly and accurately.

The Effects of Performance Assessment on Employees' Motivation: Service companies, particularly people-based service firms, should improve employees' responsiveness by increasing employees' motivations, improving selling skills, attitude training, clearer role perceptions, and improving knowledge of the service itself and the organizational policies. Motivating the workforce is one of the most critical challenges facing organizations today (Lee & Bruvold, 2003). Motivation entails getting to know the relevant employees, their desires and aspirations and the means by which they can be encouraged to behave in

specific ways. Both subjective and objective factors will need to be taken into account (Adamus, 2005). Performance appraisal means evaluating an employee's current or past performance relative to the person's performance standards. Appraisal involves setting work standards, assessing the employee's actual performance relative to these standards and providing feedback to the employee with the aim of motivating that person to eliminate deficiencies or to continue to perform above par (Dessler, 2003). In all the service organizations, the motivation of the employee involved is the most important issue, whether they are skilled, unskilled or professional level. Khan, Farooq & Ullah (2010) reported that one of the goals for a services manager is to develop motivated employees and encourage their morale regarding their particular work assignments. Most employees exceed satisfaction in terms of performance assessment benefit to the organization as they are willing to take more responsibility, increase their abilities, skills, activities and productivity. The positive results of the performance assessment give the employees' motivation as well as job satisfaction, which therefore lead to performance improvement, team work and cooperation in the workplace. In contrast, Dessler (2003) questioned the role of appraisals in managing performance and asked "Do appraisals really help to improve performance?"

Lawler (1994) and Grote (2000) both argued that many experts feel that traditional appraisals do not improve performance and may actually backfire. They concluded that most performance appraisal systems neither motivate employees nor guide their development. Furthermore, "... they cause conflict between supervisors and subordinates and lead to dysfunctional behaviours" (Dessler, 2003). Other researchers have suggested that employees have higher job motivation when they perceive their performance assessments as fair and trustworthy (Vasset, Marnburg & Furunes, 2010). Overall, then, performance assessment literature within the corporate world has made some progress in seeking to identify ways in which existing modes of interaction between human resource management and employees can be used in performance assessment. Some of the more obvious missteps have been identified and it is possible for managers now to minimize the chance of alienating employees by using such a scheme. However, most if not all of this research has taken place in the organizations of the western or developed world. This is, of course, true of a great deal of research in management studies. One of the objectives of this paper is to determine the extent to which the knowledge derived from western models can be usefully applied in a very different organizational context such as contemporary Myanmar.

3. Methodology

This study employed a mixed method to obtain data. Initially, collation and analysis of existing secondary data helped provide an agenda for investigation that was used with a range of international hotel managers in Yangon. The focus of the agenda was on the use and role of performance assessment in the organisations represented by the managers. Interviews were scheduled as a result of personal contact and were held in suitable locations on a face-to-face basis. Extensive note-taking during the interviews was followed by subsequent transcription of notes and interpretation into English where necessary. The principal language of research was English at this stage; for the employee questionnaire, a Burmese language version was available for those preferring not to use English – most educated citizens of Myanmar can speak some amount of English as a result of the previous colonial period, although the level of education available in the country has been uneven in recent decades. The information provided by managers was integrated into the employee questionnaire creation process. Existing instruments used in this area were examined and the assistance of experts was enlisted to help construct a self-administered questionnaire that would be distributed through managers at the hotels involved. The assistance of managers in this regard had been sought during the qualitative interviewing process. The completed questionnaire was produced in both English and Burmese language versions. A pilot test of the two versions of the questionnaire revealed that only minor changes of wording were required. Subsequently, the questionnaire was distributed throughout the range of hotels in Yangon.

Some resistance was noted at two levels: first, in some cases hotels did not wish to participate in this research study; second, in certain cases individuals were reluctant to participate because they had not become accustomed to being asked for their opinions (which is of course one of the principal motivations of the study) and may have felt that it would be impolitic for them to reveal their true feelings, since such information might have been used against them. Full confidentiality was guaranteed to the respondents and

any employee who did not wish to participate for any reason was not persuaded otherwise. This helps explain some of the variability in the response rate. The sampling method was, therefore, convenience sampling. The population of respondents was defined as international standard hotels in Yangon. According to the Ministry of Hotels and Tourism (2010), there are a total of 651 hotels, motels and guest houses in Myanmar as a whole and 172 of these are located in Yangon. A total of 32 projects involved foreign investment that have been completed and a further five which remained under construction at the time of the research. It is these projects, when they are located in Yangon that is considered to be the population. Table 2 below shows the list of hotels approached for the research and the number of completed, usable responses obtained. The total number of such questionnaires was 303.

Table 2: Number of employees in selected international hotels in Yangon; source: original research

Hotel	Estimated Employees	Respondents
Chatrium Hotel, Yangon	350	38
Grand Plaza Park Royal Hotel	320	35
Kandawgyi Palace Hotel	250	31
Micasa Hotel Apartments	198	30
Dusit Inya Lake Resort Hotel	220	20
Savoy Hotel	70	0
Sedona Hotel, Yangon	310	27
Summit Parkview Yangon Hotel	110	14
The Governor's Residence	100	24
The Strand Hotel	145	20
Traders' Hotel, Yangon	425	42
Season of the Hotel	130	22
The Grand Mee Ya Hta Hotel and Apartments	100	0
Yangon International Hotel	110	0
Total	2,838	303

More respondents would have been preferable but the total number obtained, which were obtained from 11 of the 14 eligible hotels, is nevertheless large enough to represent an approximation of the true results if everybody had been interviewed with a reasonable degree of confidence. Respondents included those who worked in administrative, clerical and operational areas, in addition to managers and supervisors. As mentioned above, practical issues limited the overall size of response. Data collection took place during April-May, 2011.

4. Results

In terms of the demographic profile of the non-managerial employees, most of the respondents were from the sales and marketing department, front office, food and beverages department, finance department and housekeeping department. There were 303 respondents and the number of female respondents was greater than those of the males, however the gap is not that much noticeable on overall view. Most of the respondents who are working in hotels are around ages of 30-39 years, followed by 20-29 year-olds. Meanwhile, there were two 50-59 year olds were the oldest respondents. The highest education levels attained by the respondents are categorized into 4 groups and most of respondents got a bachelor degree while 2 respondents holding master degrees are also present. Most respondents had two or three years of service in their respective hotels. However, it was found that some respondents have a service record of five years and more in some hotels. Maximum number of service years is 3 years while minimum is 4 years but 5 years of service is not uncommon as it ranks third out of a range of five categories for years of service.

When asked about their opinion concerning optimal timing of performance assessment, 49% answered that it should be annual and 41% who thought it should be twice a year. Some 61.7% of employees had met expectations in their last performance assessment, while 27.0% had exceeded expectations and 1.7% had excelled; another 9.1% had failed to meet expectations or had required improvements of some sort. The hypotheses selected for testing, which are displayed below, were converted into null format and then tested with the simplest possible statistical procedure, which involved chi-square cross-tabulations. The following

tables display a summary of the analysis and the results. In this research, the hypotheses are divided into three parts; demographic factors of assessees and assessors (hypothesis 1 to hypothesis 2), corporate performance assessment (hypothesis 3 to hypothesis 7) and human resource practices to performance assessment (hypothesis 8 to hypothesis 11).

Table 3: Summary of testing of research hypotheses; source: original research

	Hypothesis	Status
1	There is a significant relationship between assessees' (non management employees) demographic factors of gender, age, highest education level achieved, work experience and employees' attitude including employees' performance, motivation and tendency to leave.	Supported
2	There is a significant relationship between corporate performance assessor's demographic factors (gender and rank) and employees. (Assessees) attitude including employees' performance, motivation and tendency to leave.	Supported
3	There is a significant relationship between performance assessment method and employees' attitude including employees' performance, motivation and tendency to leave.	Not supported
4	There is a relationship between performance assessment outcomes and employees' attitude including performance, motivation and tendency to leave.	Supported
5	There is a relationship between frequency of performance assessment and employees' attitude including performance, motivation and tendency to leave.	Not supported
6	There is a relationship between optimum frequency of performance assessment and employees' attitude including performance, motivation and tendency to leave.	Supported
7.1	There is a relationship between opinions on performance assessment being either beneficial or detrimental and employees' attitude including performance, motivation and tendency to leave.	Supported
7.2	There is a relationship between opinion on fairness of the performance assessment and employees' attitude including performance, motivation and tendency to leave.	Supported
8	There is a relationship with employees' participation in performance assessment process and employees' attitude including performance, motivation and tendency to leave.	Supported
9	There is a relationship with one of the human resource practices of career advancement, social welfare packages and employees' attitude including performance, motivation and tendency to leave.	Supported
10	There is a relationship between human resource practice of consideration for employees' career progression based on employees' performance or seniority and employees' attitude including performance, motivation and tendency to leave.	Supported
11	There is a relationship with reward programs for employees in an organization and employees' attitude including performance, motivation and tendency to leave.	Supported

Table 3 indicates that the majority of hypotheses which had been formulated to explore the research. The support was evident in the expected direction and leads to the conclusion that people have tended to behave in Myanmar in the same way that they would in most other countries. That is, those employees who have done well in performance assessment tend to have a more positive attitude towards the process, to be more likely to remain with the hotel and to have formulated a long-term strategy for career progression. It is reasonable to assume, therefore, that hotels in which performance assessment is perceived by the majority of the workforce to be taking place in a reasonable and helpful manner are more likely to be organisations with a good and positive corporate culture that delivers equally good service to stakeholders. Of course, performance assessment alone is insufficient to provide good service when other problems exist. Nevertheless, it is a means of promoting higher standards.

Table 4: Summary of statistical analyses of research hypotheses; source: original research

Number	Variables	Performance assessment Performance	Outcome and Motivation	Employees’ Attitudes Tendency to Leave	Remarks
Demographic Factors					
H1	Assesseees - gender	0.480	0.411	0.167	Supported
	Age	0.031*	0.688	0.064	
	Education level	0.251	0.035*	0.995	
	Work experience	0.448	0.207	0.291	
H2	Assessors – gender	0.000**	0.008**	0.755	Supported
	Rank	0.028*	0.196	0.921	
Corporate Performance Assessment					
H3	Method	0.543	0.549	0.465	Not supported
H4	Outcomes	0.000**	0.008**	0.005*	Supported
H5	Frequency	0.159	0.145	0.903	Not supported
H6	Optimum frequency	0.112	0.011*	0.081	Supported
H7.1	Opinion – beneficial or detrimental	0.000**	0.000**	0.000**	Supported
H7.2	Opinion – fairness	0.000**	0.000**	0.000**	Supported
Human Resource Practices					
H8	Employees’ participation in process	0.000**	0.001**	0.000**	Supported
H9	Social welfare packages and career advancement	0.000**	0.000**	0.000**	Supported
H10	Consideration of career progression on performance or seniority	0.000**	0.000**	0.000**	Supported
H11	Reward programs	0.000**	0.000**	0.042*	Supported

Table 4 breaks down the cross-tabulations by different explanatory variables to help indicate differential responses by different categories of people. It is evident from this that people differ most commonly with respect to the hypotheses concerning human resources practices in the company. As would be expected, those respondents who seem to have a greater level of commitment to the company, at least as represented by the answers they provided, are those who have the most positive attitude towards performance assessment. Results hint that this tendency is more important than demographic factors or by perceptions of the fairness of the tests themselves. Examination of the results when analysed by location of respondent did not provide these significant distributions and, hence, it seems more sensible to divide employees into those showing high and low levels of commitment to their work rather than to try to find workplace-specific differences. Interviews with managers indicated that, since the international hotel sector was still quite young, it was difficult to find many employees who have remained in their present post for five years or more. In the one hotel at which this was relatively common, this coincided with the presence of numerous training programmes and employee development schemes. It remains to be seen whether there is a causal link in this case or whether other hotels will, when they have established themselves in the market more fully, also further add to their own employee development programmes.

Discussion: As Myanmar opens its markets to international activities, it will need higher quality human resources in all aspects of commercial activity, not the least of which will be in the tourism industry. To date, developing human resources has been a responsibility that has been passed on to commercial companies, whether they are domestically or internationally-funded. The result has been, unsurprisingly, a generally low level of spending on training and development and concentration on low-labour cost manufacturing and processing activities. In the context of the forthcoming 2015 ASEAN Economic Community, which is

scheduled to permit (*inter alia*) free flow of skilled labour among the ten member states, it will not be practical for the Myanmar government simply to continue with business as usual with respect to its labour force. The technical capacity of the government is, however, limited in this area and so it will be necessary to facilitate the presence and activity of other service providers. Many such providers are, in other parts of the Mekong region, non-government organisations which have occasionally proved themselves troublesome to governments because of their calls for greater civil liberties and freedoms. Causing the next level of economic development to take place will, therefore, necessitate social and political changes in addition to the commercial and economic ones. Powerful governments, such as the Chinese, can use their power to ensure that economic changes need not be accompanied by political change; however, the government of Myanmar is not able to wield that level of power in the long run. The results of this study indicate that employees in Yangon's international hotels behave in a rational and predictable fashion in that there is a set of employees who tend to show a higher level of commitment to their jobs and perhaps make long-term careers of them, as well as another group with rather lower levels of commitment.

To some extent, it can be imagined, there will be a possibility of individuals moving from one group to another group, if they are inspired by good management techniques to become more motivated or, alternatively, if they become disaffected by an event or policy at work. Under such circumstances, it can be imagined that standard managerial techniques introduced as international best practice will overcome any location-specific cultural factors that had been previously influential. The spread of a more advanced form of capitalism to Myanmar will, in other words, take a similar means of progress to its progress in other parts of the region. In terms of the nature of performance assessment more specifically, it appears that, as the literature has suggested, there is no one method that is plainly superior to any other when it comes to instituting human resource development programmes. The complexity of modern business operations and the range of different products, services and customer types so diverse that it is highly unlikely that one approach or method will suit all situations – or, even, that one approach may be successfully exported beyond its immediate environment and used in a different organization or workplace. This is not an essentialist or culture-based argument so much as it is an argument that contemporary business is incredibly complex and people need the freedom, the confidence and the desire to meet the challenge of that complexity by varying the marketing mix offered to individual customers who vary in a controlled manner across space and time.

5. Conclusion

In a rapidly changing economy, the study of management practices always runs the risk of becoming swiftly outdated and, consequently, it is appropriate to conduct research on a longitudinal basis insofar as this is possible. It is also the case that the policies and practices put into place in the economy over recent years will feed into changes in the future, as individuals learn international best practice within the hotel sector and then later transfer it into the economy more widely when they begin their own entrepreneurial ventures.

In this case, it is evident that there are lessons to be learned from the ways in which performance assessment has been put into practice and examining the distribution of different groups within the overall workforce and their different responses. These are issues which should be the cause of additional research on both longitudinal and comparative bases. Such research should also take account of different environments, such as Myanmar, compared to the locations of most management research. Although international hotels in Yangon aspire to international best practice, they are often unable to achieve that level because of the lack of important inputs or because support facilities negatively affect the antecedent state of customers or because of a myriad of other ways in which customer experience can be affected negatively beyond the control of hotel management.

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