EXPERT AND NOVICE COGNITIVE PROCESSING MODELS IN PERFORMANCE APPRAISAL: EVIDENCE FROM THE MALAYSIAN EDUCATION SYSTEM

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ABSTRACT

The effectiveness of the decision making in the appraisal process has been of long-standing interest. This paper reports the results of research exploring decision making in the appraisal and, in particular, the extent to which those undertaking appraisals apply systematic processes to their decision making, represented in terms of the cognitive processing models applied by appraisers. Results of 22 cognitive mapping interviews undertaken with appraisers in the Malaysian Education System are described. The resultant causal cognitive maps have been explored for what they tell us about the cognitive processing models that are used by appraisers to inform their decision making. Two groups of appraisers are identified: novices and experts. Results suggest that the cognitive processing models espoused by appraisers are not significantly different from theoretical cognitive processing models, although some differences are observed between novice and expert appraisers' models. From these, implications for the practice of appraisal and theory and research into cognitive processing models are identified.

Kewords: appraisal process, cognitive processing model. decision making, public service, semi-structured interview,

INTRODUCTION

An organisation's performance appraisal system is an important, but often neglected, tool for managing the effectiveness and efficiency of employees in the workplace (Armstrong and Baron, 1998), and there is widespread and significant recognition that it is those employees that create a competitive advantage. As Drucker (1994) puts it, employees are the organization's most valuable assets, and they can determine the success and survival of an organisation. The appraisal is one significant way in which the efforts of those employees can be aligned with the aims of an organisation and those employees can be motivated and supported (Desimone, Werner and Harris, 2002). Despite this, many organisations and managers fail to give appraisal the attention and support it deserves (see Armstrong, 1998; Aminuddin, 2001).

This paper describes research into the performance appraisal system employed in the Malaysian Public Service, which concentrates on the cognitive processing models of the appraisers operating under that system. Cognitive processing models represent the internal decision making processes employed by individuals, and indicate an ideal form of systematic decision making (Neisser, 1967). They are of significance to the performance appraisal process, as they represent the human information processing appraisers use to draw conclusions about, and make evaluations of individuals' performance (Hamilton and Warburton, 1979, DeNisi, 1996). It has been argued elsewhere that much of poor appraisal practices are due to inaccurate, or inappropriate decision making on the part of managers undertaking appraisal (see for example, Longnecker, Sims and Gioia, 1992). Exploring the extent to which appraisers follow an ideal form of decision making may highlight where such failures or difficulties occur, and is likely to indicate the extent of effectiveness and/or validity of any evaluations made.

The first section of this paper looks at the appraisal process as practised elsewhere in general and specifically in the Malaysian Public Service. This is followed by a brief discussion of existing theory about and research into cognitive processing models. After this, the research aim and objectives are outlined, and the methods employed in this study are described. Research findings are then detailed and this paper ends by discussing the outcomes of the cognitive mapping interviews and drawing implications for research on cognitive processing models and the appraisal process in organisations.