

IBM® Smarter Workforce Institute

Can performance management inspire?

Employee reactions to a non-traditional performance evaluation

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Introduction

Most companies use some form of performance management in an attempt to improve their employee productivity.¹ Despite its ubiquity, traditional performance management has been widely criticized for being ineffective or even broken.² While some companies such as Deloitte and Microsoft are reported to be moving away from traditional performance management, there is far from a mass exodus.³ Rather, most companies are attempting to transform their existing traditional performance management by introducing new approaches.

One of the key drivers for replacing traditional performance management is its failure to motivate employees and improve their performance. For this reason, an understanding of how employees' view new approaches to performance management is vital. Unfortunately, there is a lack of research evidence concerning how employees react to these new approaches.

To address this, the IBM Smarter Workforce Institute investigated an organization that has recently implemented a new agile approach to performance management in one of its business units (See Appendix for research method). In contrast to the traditional annual process, the new agile approach uses social technology to set transparent and flexible goals and provide timely and multi-sourced feedback.⁴ It also includes a new performance evaluation system. Table 1 summarizes the differences between the traditional relative rating system and the new performance evaluation system.

In this paper we present research findings into employee reactions to the new evaluation system. The findings provide useful evidence-based guidance for organizations considering a move away from traditional performance evaluation.

Traditional relative rating	New performance evaluation
Employees rated against peers—a 'relative' approach	Employees rated individually without comparison to others—an 'absolute' approach
Employees assessed on work performance	Employees assessed on both work performance and new dimensions of expertise and potential
Performance rated with a 5-point rating scale, with guidance on rating distributions	Performance rated with a simplified scale, no specified guidance on expected rating distributions

Table 1: Differences between the traditional relative rating system and the new performance evaluation system in the study

Executive Summary

Our findings reveal positive and encouraging results for the new performance evaluation approach.

Key findings:

Compared to the traditional rating approach, employees experiencing the new approach report:

- Higher evaluation accuracy (nearly 20 percentage points)
- Greater usefulness of the evaluation (8 percentage points)
- Higher satisfaction with their manager performance discussions (about 20 percentage points)
- Greater motivation to improve (16 percentage points)
- More organizational support (23 percentage points)

Overall, most (83 percent) say the new system is as good (27 percent) or better than (56 percent) the traditional system. Almost 60 percent would recommend the new evaluation system to others.

Suggestions for improving the new approach include additional communication and training, and ensuring top performers are sufficiently recognized.

As a whole, the results suggest that the new multi-dimensional and absolute approach to performance evaluation is more effective and motivating than the traditional relative rating approach.

The new multi-dimensional and absolute approach to performance evaluation is more effective and motivating.

Employee reactions to performance evaluation are critical to success

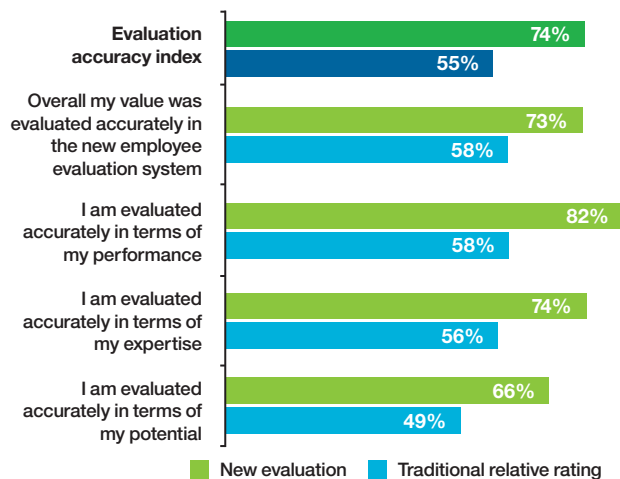
The concept of employee reactions to performance evaluation is defined as employees' attitudinal evaluations of and responses to the performance evaluation process.⁵ Employee reactions to performance evaluation are important criteria for judging the effectiveness of performance evaluation.⁶

Is the new evaluation system more accurate?

Perceived accuracy of evaluation is one of the most widely used criteria for the effectiveness of performance evaluation.⁷ In traditional relative rating, managers usually compare employee performance against others and sort all employees into pre-determined performance categories. In contrast, the new evaluation is based on an independent assessment of each employee's performance.

Our analyses show that employees in the new performance evaluation system perceive a higher level of evaluation accuracy. On average, employees in the new system report a nearly 20 percentage point higher level of evaluation accuracy than those in the traditional approach (Figure 1). Specifically, employees in the new system are more likely to report they are evaluated accurately than those in the traditional system in terms of overall perception (73 percent vs. 58 percent), performance (82 percent vs. 58 percent), expertise (74 percent vs. 56 percent), and potential (66 percent vs. 49 percent).

Figure 1: Higher levels of perceived evaluation accuracy



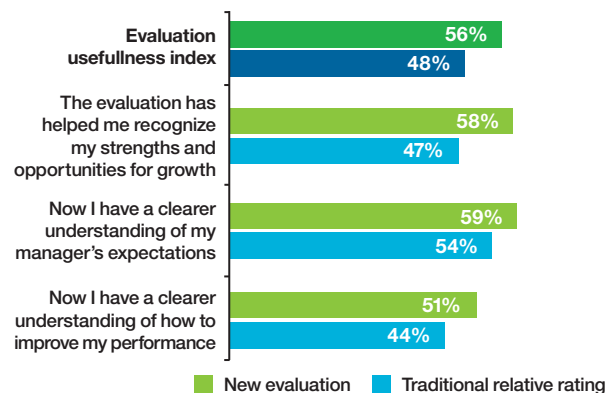
Note: The chart shows the percentages of employees who agree or strongly agree with the statements. Sample size of the experimental group=428; sample size of the control group=1,246. Index score is the mean score across all items listed in the chart. Differences between the two groups are statistically significant (p<0.05).

Is the new evaluation more useful for employees?

The usefulness of the evaluation refers to the extent to which employees think the evaluation provides them with useful information about job expectations. Compared to the traditional evaluation in which employees usually receive performance feedback about how well they did against their goals and peers, employees in the new system receive feedback beyond work performance. They also receive feedback about their expertise levels and potential for growth. That is, the feedback employees receive in the new system provides more insight into their strengths and opportunities for advancement. For these reasons, we would expect employees to perceive the new evaluation system to be more useful.

The results show that the employees in the new system report a higher level of usefulness than those in the traditional system (56 percent vs. 48 percent on average) (Figure 2). Specifically, employees in the new system are more likely to report a clearer understanding of their strengths and weaknesses (58 percent vs. 47 percent), their managers' expectations (59 percent vs. 54 percent), and how to improve performance compared to employees using the traditional approach (51 percent vs. 44 percent).

Figure 2: Higher levels of perceived usefulness of evaluation



Note: The chart shows the percentages of employees who agree or strongly agree with the statements. Sample size of the experimental group=428; sample size of the control group=1,246. Index score is the mean score for each item listed in the chart. Differences between the two groups are statistically significant (p<0.05).

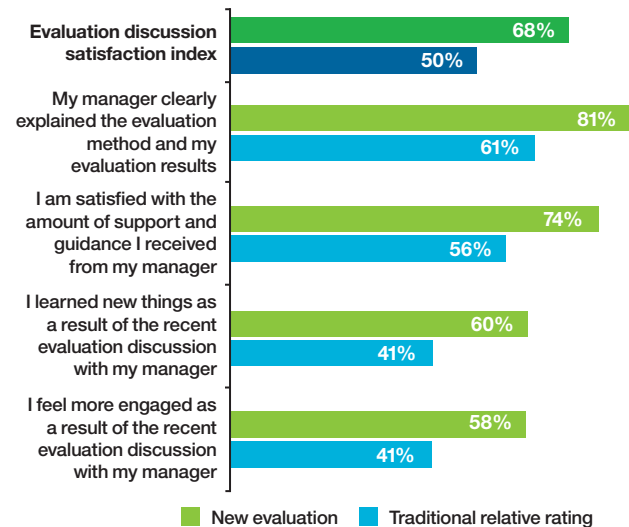
Are employees more satisfied with the new evaluation?

Satisfaction in the context of performance evaluation is most frequently measured in two ways: satisfaction with the evaluation discussion with managers and satisfaction with the overall evaluation system.⁸ Since the new system introduces two new dimensions (expertise and potential) employees should have more opportunities to discuss important matters, such as what is expected of them and how to improve, with their managers. Consequently, we anticipate that employees are more likely to be satisfied with the discussion and the overall system in the new approach.

As expected, the results show that employees in the new system report a considerably higher level of satisfaction (18 percentage points higher) with their manager discussions than those in the traditional evaluation system (Figure 3). Specifically, compared to the traditional system, employees in the new system are more likely to be satisfied with the clear explanation (81 percent vs. 61 percent) and support received from their managers (74 percent vs. 56 percent) than those in the traditional system. They are also more likely to learn new things (60 percent vs. 41 percent) and feel more engaged (58 percent vs. 41 percent) after the performance discussions with their managers than employees in the traditional system. See Figure 3.

Employees in the new system report a considerably higher level of satisfaction with their manager discussions.

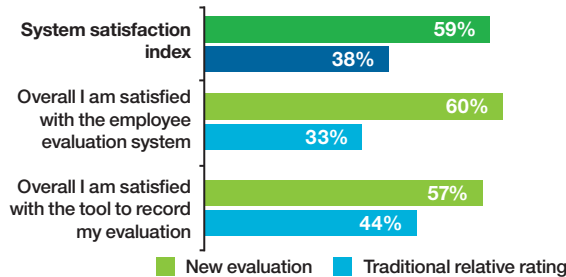
Figure 3: Higher levels of satisfaction with manager discussions



Note: The chart shows the percentages of employees who agree or strongly agree with the statements. Sample size of the experimental group=428; sample size of the control group=1,246. Index score is the mean score for each item listed in the chart. Differences between the two groups are statistically significant ($p < 0.05$).

Similarly, employees in the new approach report a higher level of satisfaction with the overall system than those in the traditional approach (59 percent vs. 38 percent), a 21 percentage point difference (Figure 4). Specifically, a majority (60 percent) of employees in the new system are satisfied with the overall system in general, while just one in three (33 percent) in the traditional approach feel satisfied. More than half (57 percent) in the new system are happy with the tool used to record the evaluation compared to fewer than half (44 percent) in the traditional approach.

Figure 4: Higher levels of satisfaction with the overall system



Note: The chart shows the percentages of those who agree or strongly agree with the statements. Sample size of the experimental group=428; sample size of the control group=1,246. Index score is the mean score for each item listed in the chart. Differences between the two groups are statistically significant ($p < 0.05$).

Is the new evaluation linked to favorable employee outcomes?

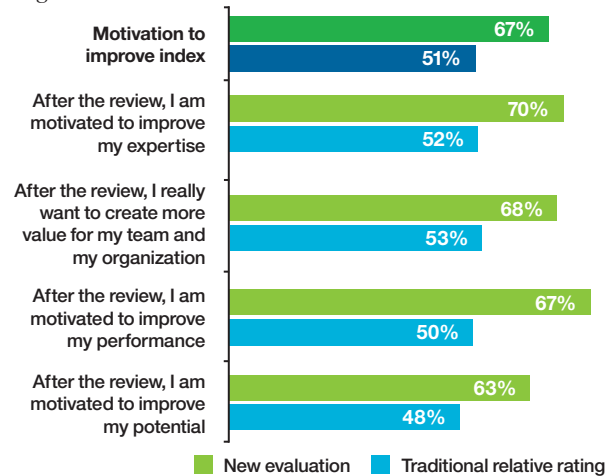
As established above, employees in the new system report higher levels of accuracy and usefulness in the new evaluation. They also enjoy better discussions with their managers and are happy with the overall evaluation system. Previous studies in the literature indicate that employees who have positive reactions to performance evaluation are more likely to accept the evaluation results and use the results to improve themselves.⁹ Therefore, we expect more favorable employee outcomes (i.e. motivation to improve, perceived organizational support, and perceived work effectiveness) in the new system.

Increased motivation to improve

How motivated employees are to improve their performance after evaluation is viewed as an important employee outcome of performance evaluation.¹⁰ Our analyses reveal that the level of employee motivation to improve is much higher in the new evaluation system than in the traditional evaluation system (67 percent vs. 51 percent). Specifically, compared to the traditional system, employees in the new system are more likely to be motivated to improve on all the dimensions of the evaluation: expertise (70 percent vs. 52 percent),

performance (67 percent vs. 50 percent), and potential (63 percent vs. 48 percent). They are also more likely to want to create more value for their teams and organizations (68 percent vs. 53 percent). See Figure 5.

Figure 5: Increased motivation to improve



Note: The chart shows the percentages of employees who agree or strongly agree with the statements. Sample size of the experimental group=428; sample size of the control group=1,246. Index score is the mean score across all items listed in the chart. Differences between the two groups are statistically significant ($p < 0.05$).

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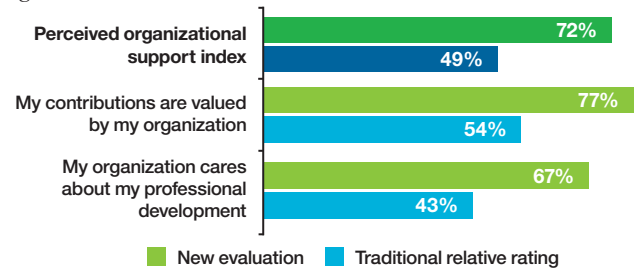
Enhanced views of organizational support

It is likely that employees in the new system perceive they receive more support from their organization for two reasons. First, moving away from the traditional system and investing in a new evaluation system may deliver a signal to employees that the organization cares about employee performance and professional growth. Second, employees who think the evaluation results are more accurate and useful are more likely to feel their organization cares about their personal development and thus perceive a higher level of organizational support.

As expected, our analyses show employees in the new evaluation system report a considerably higher level of organizational support (72 percent) than those in the traditional system (49 percent), a 23 percentage point difference (Figure 6). In more detail, most employees (77 percent) in the new evaluation say that their contributions are valued by their organization, while only about half (54 percent) in the traditional system say so; a majority (67 percent) in the new system think their organization cares about their professional growth, while fewer than half (43 percent) in the traditional system agree.

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Figure 6: Enhanced views of organizational support

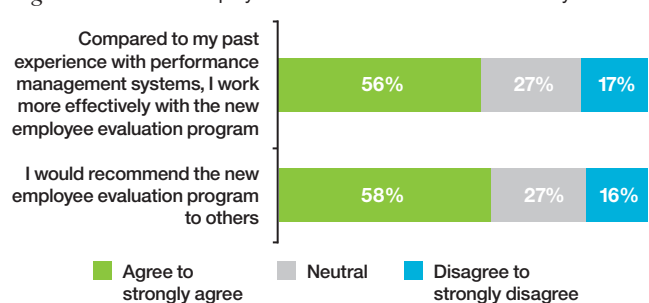


Note: The chart shows the percentages of employees who agree or strongly agree with the statements. Sample size of the experimental group=428; sample size of the control group=1,246. Index score is the mean score for each item listed in the chart. Differences between the two groups are statistically significant ($p < 0.05$).

Improved perceptions of work effectiveness

Our results also support the link between the new system and enhanced work performance. In answering the questions about whether they work more effectively with the new employee evaluation program, most (83 percent) say the new system is as good (27 percent) or better than (56 percent) the traditional system. In addition, almost 60 percent would recommend the new evaluation system to others, while only one in six (16 percent) would not recommend it. See Figure 7.

Figure 7: Favorable employee outcomes in the new evaluation system



Note: Sample size of the experimental group=428.

What do employees like and dislike about the new evaluation system?

To better understand the employee perspective, we asked them to tell us what they liked and disliked about the new evaluation system in their own words. We analyzed the comments with IBM SPSS Text Analytics and this revealed a number of common themes below.

According to the employees who have gone through the new evaluation process, this new approach is better than the traditional system in several ways (Table 2). At the top of the list is the preference for a broader evaluation, rather than one single score. Also rated highly is the use of absolute rather than comparative or relative ratings. It appears that employees prefer to be assessed individually rather than relative to others. In addition, one in 10 comments from employees related to their appreciation for the fact that the new system is simpler and easier to understand. Finally, 5 percent of comments mention the potential positive impact of the new evaluation system on collaboration and teamwork.

Table 2: Major themes of what employees like about the new evaluation

What do employees like?	Percentage of comments on the theme	Quotes
Rating on multiple dimensions	26%	I like the breakdown of different areas. That really helps to focus on problem areas and know where my strengths and weaknesses are.
The use of absolute ratings instead of relative ratings	21%	[I] like that the managers aren't forced into comparing team members against each other.
A system that is simpler, easier to understand	10%	It's simple and straightforward and it represents a new way [of] thinking, and saves much time.
A system that promotes collaboration and teamwork	5%	The benefit of [the system is that the] employee has more opportunity to explore and collaborate.
Better communication with manager	4%	I like the fact that the new process enabled a positive and constructive discussion with my manager. The positive approach almost encourages me to seek feedback.

Note: Sample size of the experimental group=312

The common themes of what employees dislike are presented in table 3. The top concern relates to the new ratings for employee expertise and potential. It is not surprising to find that in the first cycle of the new evaluation system, some employees have trouble understanding the new dimensions. Some employees also dislike the fact that their performance is rated with a simplified scale and comments mention the difficulty of knowing exactly where they stand and how high and low performers can be differentiated. In addition, employees mention being unclear about the link between performance evaluation and pay.

Table 3: Major themes of what employees dislike about the new evaluation

What do employees dislike?	Percentage of comments on the theme	Quotes
Difficult to understand new dimensions	32%	Not all of the categories were well explained.
Over simplified rating of performance	8%	At first, I thought I would like this. But now, I think I would like there to be finer-grained information about performance.
Evaluation disconnected from pay	7%	This information was not provided during this evaluation process, but it would have been very welcome, along with concrete examples of how one would improve their value and compensation.
Social aspects of feedback*	5%	I do not like the idea of going out to the blog and listing out your accomplishments there, for that to become a part of the evaluation.
Doesn't recognize high performers	4%	What I dislike about the system is that there is no scope to call out high performance, except in the comments section.

Note: Sample size of the experimental group=288. * Consistent with our previous findings¹¹, some people express being uncomfortable with the social aspects of feedback especially coaching feedback; social goal setting and feedback were part of the overall performance management redesign.

Conclusion and implications

Although it is estimated as many as 60 percent of Fortune 500 organizations have adopted some form of traditional relative rating,¹² traditional performance management has been found to destroy employee morale and has even led to legal issues.¹³ Many organizations are on the lookout for improved performance management solutions. This study reveals that a new evaluation system that uses ‘absolute’ rating based on multiple dimensions is perceived by employees as more useful, accurate and motivating. Employees in the new system also report increased motivation to improve, enhanced views of organizational support, and improved perceptions of work effectiveness.

This study also highlights important considerations for organizations looking to move away from traditional performance evaluation:

- **Ensure there is a good understanding of the new system**

It is important for organizations to brief employees on the new evaluation system before and during its implementation. This should include careful briefing of any new areas of evaluation, such as new dimensions against which employees are measured. This will ensure that both employees and managers fully understand how to evaluate all areas of performance.

- **Communicate the link between performance evaluation and other HR practices**

Some employees who participated in our survey wanted to know how evaluation results would affect pay. They said that they would not feel encouraged to go the extra mile if performance evaluation and pay were disconnected. Therefore, it is important for organizations to establish a clear link between the evaluation results and other HR practices before implementing a new evaluation system. For example, organizations may want to clearly explain to employees how the results of the new evaluation will affect their compensation and professional development.

- **Ensure top performers are valued using recognition**

Some employees in our survey expressed concerns about the simplified rating scale used to measure performance. They doubt that it can differentiate top performers from others. This is an important point for consideration. Without appropriate recognition some high performing employees may lose motivation. In view of this, organizations may want to consider using recognition programs to engage and motivate top performers. Social recognition that provides real-time, multisource appreciation feedback appears to be an effective way to recognize individuals’ achievements and successes.¹⁴ In addition, using multiple communication channels to provide recognition is associated with higher levels of employee engagement.¹⁵ For more insights on this topic, see the IBM Smarter Workforce Institute white paper titled: *How do I recognize thee? Let me count the ways.*

- **Validate performance evaluation criteria and methods**

Given that performance evaluation is usually used to make human resource decisions such as promotions and pay increases, organizations need to consider potential legal implications when implementing a new performance evaluation system.¹⁶ Any new performance evaluation criteria and methods should be well validated, using a validation procedure similar to that used for employee selection, to avoid the risk of discrimination in the workplace.¹⁷

Finally, it should be noted that this paper is focused on the employee perspective of a new performance evaluation system, and the perspectives of HR professionals and business leaders should also be studied. In particular, it would be important to explore which evaluation method better serves the purposes of performance evaluation; ‘relative’ methods may do a better job of capturing job performance,¹⁸ ‘absolute’ evaluation methods are perceived as more fair¹⁹ and, as established in this paper, are favored by employees in terms of evaluation accuracy, usefulness, and satisfaction. Further research would help to establish additional guidance for organizations in this area.

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Appendix

Research method

In 2014-2015, a business unit of a large technology company implemented a new performance management system consisting of social goal setting, timely multi-sourced feedback, and a non-traditional evaluation method. The study surveyed employees in the business unit (experimental group) and compared their responses with employees from other business units in the same organization who continued with the traditional performance management approach (control group).

Five months after the implementation of new social goal setting and feedback, the IBM Smarter Workforce Institute conducted the first wave survey of employee experiences concerning goal setting and feedback. We received responses from 445 employees in the experimental group (34% response rate) and 2,042 in the control group (69% response rate). Five months later, we conducted a second wave of surveying, asking questions about goal setting, feedback and performance evaluation. In this second wave, 428 employees in the experimental group and 1,246 employees in the control group answered the survey. The response rates were 30% and 55% respectively.

The questions included in the second survey about performance evaluation measure those employee reactions that are most frequently examined in the literature and most relevant to the new evaluation system. These questions asked how employees felt about:

- Accuracy of the evaluation
- Usefulness of the evaluation
- The evaluation discussion with their manager
- The overall evaluation system

The survey also asked questions about related employee outcomes to help understand how likely employees were to:

- Feel motivated to improve
- Feel supported by their organization
- Expect to work more effectively

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