



Exploring employees' experiences with the performance appraisals at the South African Air Force

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Orientation: Performance management systems (PMS) are implemented through performance appraisals (PA), and during the PAs, fairness and justice should prevail to enhance employees' positive experiences and satisfaction with the system.

Research purpose: The study aimed to explore and understand the South African Air Force (SAAF) employees' experiences with the PAs and propose solutions thereof.

Motivation for the study: Despite its critical role in national defence, the South African Air Force is experiencing employee engagement and commitment challenges. Preliminary investigations suggest that these issues arise from shortcomings in the PA process and the distribution of rewards.

Research approach/design and method: The study adopted a qualitative phenomenological design and employed semi-structured interviews for data collection. Participants were selected through purposive sampling, and data collection ended after the 11th participant due to saturation reached by the 10th. Data analysis employed content analysis and inductive coding techniques.

Main findings: The results revealed PAs demotivating and biased. Proposed solutions included frequent PAs, eliminating the quota system, training line managers and linking performance standards with rewards and career advancement.

Practical/managerial implications: The findings suggest a revision of the PMS policy at the SAAF, along with a reevaluation of Affirmative Action and career progression policies. It is essential for line managers to grasp the strategic importance of PMS and PAs within the organisation.

Contribution/value-add: This study provides valuable insights to the SAAF management regarding employees' experiences with the overall PMS, particularly the PA sessions. It also recommends solutions for implementing the PMS effectively at the SAAF.

Keywords: performance appraisal; performance management system; Expectancy Theory; Equity Theory; motivation; rewards; South African Air Force.

Introduction

Performance management and performance appraisal (PA), although often confused, are distinct concepts (Cappelli & Conyon, 2018; Murphy & DeNisi, 2023). While one approach focuses on sustainable performance and overall organisational productivity, the other emphasises rewards as motivation to achieve specific performance targets (Murphy & DeNisi, 2023). Performance management emphasises both current and future development within an organisation. It involves defining training and development programmes based on regular feedback about employees' performance (Aguinis, 2019; Du Plessis & Van Niekerk, 2017; George, 2016; Modipane et al., 2019; Ramulumisi et al., 2015). This approach fosters continuous improvement and aligns individual performance with organisational goals. The performance appraisal focuses on historical data and uses ranking systems to assess employees' progress towards predefined objectives, offering rewards and incentives (Milliman et al., 2002; Morley et al., 2021; Murphy & Cleveland, 1995; Murphy & DeNisi, 2023; Pettijohn et al., 2001). The performance appraisal constitutes the implementation phase of a performance management system (PMS), as it involves the systematic monitoring and evaluation of employee's performance. The outcomes of this process are significant, as they ultimately facilitate the

distribution of rewards or incentives (Ahmad, 2020; Armstrong, 2015; Du Plessis & Van Niekerk, 2017; Gunpath et al., 2017; Kumar & Raju, 2017; Pan et al., 2018; Sharma et al., 2016; Vroom, 1964). The PAs can be performed using various methods, including the popular one in which supervisors evaluate their subordinates face to face (Cappelli & Conyon, 2018). Despite their great and positive intentions, the PAs have been marred by negative experiences because, at times, line managers are subjective and tend to evaluate or rank employees' performance subjectively (Cappelli & Conyon, 2018; Murphy & DeNisi, 2023). The PAs as part of a PMS are conducted to identify, review the progress and reward the best or top performers, and if it is poorly implemented, in the long run, both the employees and the organisations suffer. It is against this background that this study was conducted to explore and understand how employees experience PA as implemented by line managers or supervisors at the South African Air Force (SAAF) and make necessary recommendations for improvement, if required.

Orientation

As part of the more comprehensive PMS, the PA is a systematic and structured review of an employee's job performance against a preset group of job requirements to document how well an employee is carrying out his or her job (Murphy & DeNisi, 2023). The PA is the ultimate process through which employees and line managers have check-ins or sessions throughout the year to identify areas that need improvement (King, 2020; Murphy & DeNisi, 2023). At the end of the financial year, line managers and employees have final sessions, whereby the line manager gives employees feedback about their performance throughout the year and allocates an overall performance rating, which informs the type and amount of increments and bonuses. Consistent poor performance among employees may lead to disciplinary actions or termination. Consequently, employees are unlikely to seek low or poor evaluations, as such ratings represent a violation of the performance contract established with their employer, which constitutes grounds for dismissal (DPISA, 2019). Furthermore, poor ratings also affect an employee's career progression; as a result, the PAs become stressful for employees (DeNisi & Murphy, 2017; Mitra et al., 1997, 2016; Murphy et al., 2018).

Contextualisation

The SAAF is the air warfare branch of the South African National Defence Force (SANDF), which is regulated by the White Paper on National Defence of 1996 and the *Defence Act, 2002 (Act 42 of 2002)*. The mandate of the SAAF is to safeguard the sovereignty of South Africa from the sky and the SAAF ought to always have motivated and engaged employees. The PAs, although often misconstrued, have far more far-reaching consequences for any organisation and far more devastating for the strategic organisations of national importance that safeguard the sovereignty of the country (Bagwell, 2022; Ifeanyiidike & Ofuebe, 2023). Poorly

implemented PA or unfair PAs can have negative consequences, including reduced motivation, decreased job satisfaction and legal issues, for any organisation, including the military (De Clercq et al., 2023; Madureira et al., 2021). A study examining Nigerian civil servants revealed that insufficient compensation, arising from inequitable appraisal practices, contributes to suboptimal performance. The findings suggest that this issue must be addressed through the principles of procedural justice (Ifeanyiidike & Ofuebe, 2023). In a related study conducted within the U.S. Navy, it was determined that fair appraisal practices are essential for employees at all levels to foster positive perceptions of organisational justice and to achieve optimal performance outcomes (De Clercq et al., 2023).

Different countries exhibit distinct military cultures (Evans & Bae, 2019; Utomo & Fathurrahman, 2022; Woods, 2012). An Indonesian study has demonstrated that the rigid and bureaucratic nature of military culture, characterised by a hierarchical chain of command, poses significant challenges to the implementation of PMS within the armed forces. The authors recommend that military organisations enhance their comprehension of the principles underlying performance management, as well as the implications of deviations from established PA protocols, taking into account the unique characteristics of their environment (Utomo & Fathurrahman, 2022). Even though PMS exists in the military, it becomes challenging for employees to expect or demand rewards for performance because the military culture promotes selflessness and the notion of 'serving'. As a result, top performers are made to feel like they do not need to be rewarded for doing what they pledged to do (Utomo & Fathurrahman, 2022) because they are always rated as average. Conversely, poor performance is met with harsher punishment in the military, so employees are expected to perform at their best with no promises of rewards (Utomo & Fathurrahman, 2022). In many military contexts, PMS are seen as tools that create an illusion of upward mobility and recognition (Woods, 2012). Despite focusing on performance evaluations, many feel that even exceptional contributions often fail to lead to suitable financial rewards, raising questions about the effectiveness of these systems in fostering genuine motivation and engagement (Woods, 2012). There is evidence that the military manipulates or limits the ratings so that few employees qualify for rewards using the quota system (Evans & Bae, 2019). Military organisations, despite good intentions, seem unable to successfully implement the PMS because of historical, bureaucratic and *laissez-faire* attitudes towards the system. They believe that people signed up to 'serve' and therefore should not be rewarded for 'serving' (Woods, 2012). This phenomenon is evident in the SAAF, where, despite the implementation of a PMS through PA, it is not being used as a viable retention or motivational strategy, and as a result, overall organisational performance and individual employee performance are lacking. Therefore, it became essential to explore this phenomenon within this military branch by examining it from the employees' perspective. This approach aims to understand how

employees experience the PMS and to identify potential solutions that can maximise the system's intended benefits. Moreover, the present study underscores the critical importance of PA within the SAAF management. It emphasises the necessity of nurturing a workforce that is both highly motivated and satisfied. Furthermore, it seeks to address the psychological implications associated with the commitment to performance rewards for promising employees, particularly in the instances where such promises are retracted under the rationale of 'serving'.

Literature review

Performance management system versus performance appraisal

Performance management system is a crucial strategic Human Resources Development (HRD) practice that provides a competitive advantage for the organisation by ensuring content and productive employees (Franco-Santos & Otley, 2018; Majid, 2016). As a continuous process aimed at aligning employee performance, PMS's effectiveness is determined by several factors (Aguinis, 2019; Du Plessis & Van Niekerk, 2017; George, 2016; Modipane et al., 2019; Ramulumisi et al., 2015) such as corporate culture (Ahmad, 2020) and leadership behaviour (Kumar & Raju, 2017), including the PA (Sudin, 2011). Performance appraisals, also known as annual reviews, employee appraisals, performance reviews or evaluations, are performed to evaluate an employee's skills, achievements and growth or lack thereof (Cappelli & Conyon, 2018; Murphy & DeNisi, 2023). A performance management system is a comprehensive process, and the PAs are more specific and often disliked tasks performed by line managers (Pettijohn et al., 2001). However, the PAs remain an important driver of rewards and incentives-related decisions in PMS (Milliman et al., 2002; Morley et al., 2021; Murphy & Cleveland, 1995; Murphy & DeNisi, 2023). The PAs have their share of shortcomings and criticisms such as the accuracy and reliability of performance ratings (DeNisi & Murphy, 2017) and the costs associated with them (Buckingham & Goodall, 2015; Murphy, 2020). They are criticised for discarded performance feedback (Cleveland et al., 2007), focusing on past performance (Joseph, 2014; Majid, 2016) and as a result remaining a demotivating rather than a motivating tool (Mitra et al., 1997, 2016; Murphy et al., 2018). Consequently, line managers at the SAAF might dislike performing the PAs, and employees might perceive the PA sessions and overall PMS to be a waste of time because of rater bias and lack of expected and promised rewards, rendering the systems obsolete.

To ensure that the overall PMS is perceived positively, appraisal sessions must be conducted fairly and justly (Armstrong, 2015; Sharma et al., 2016; Vroom, 1964) to lead to highly motivated employees. When perceived and experienced positively, the PA becomes consistent with the focus and emphasis on both the Equity Theory (Adams, 1965) and the Expectancy Theory (Vroom, 1964), which are discussed later below. This commitment to fairness fosters trust and engagement among employees, ultimately leading

to improved performance results and a conducive workplace culture (Ahmad, 2020; Du Plessis & Van Niekerk, 2017; Gunpath et al., 2017; Kumar & Raju, 2017; Pan et al., 2018).

The SAAF has taken a proactive step by implementing a PMS aimed at monitoring employee performance and enhancing motivation. While there are positive intentions behind this initiative (Harrington & Lee, 2015; Kim & Holzer, 2016; King, 2020), researchers have observed some challenges, including low employee commitment and organisational performance, as well as limited organisational citizenship behaviour (Erickson et al., 2022; Govender & Bussin, 2020). Addressing these areas will be crucial in refining the PMS through well-conducted PAs to better support employees and foster a more engaged and productive work environment at the SAAF (Colquitt et al., 2001; George, 2016; Mishra, 2022). The PAs play a definitive role in the successful implementation of the PMS (Aguinis, 2019; Erickson et al., 2022; Govender & Bussin, 2020; McAfee & Champagne, 1993). However, it should be noted that the PA focuses on the past behaviour or performance (Joseph, 2014; Majid, 2016), making it difficult for unskilled line managers to positively implement it (Gupta & Sethi, 2024). When negatively experienced, the overall PMS leads to dissatisfied, unproductive and unhappy employees (Du Plessis & Van Niekerk, 2017; Makhubela et al., 2016), while when the PAs are positively conducted, they lead to highly motivated, productive and satisfied employees (Aguinis et al., 2011; Makhubela et al., 2016). However, there are still no conclusions about its effectiveness and employees' perceptions and experiences at the SAAF.

At present, there is a noticeable gap in research regarding the employees' experiences with PA in military settings, particularly within the SAAF. This study seeks to delve into this under-explored area by addressing the following research question: *What are the experiences, both positive and negative of employees with the performance appraisals at the SAAF?* By examining these perspectives, the study aims to provide valuable insights into employees' lived experiences with the PA at the SAAF and recommend solutions leading to the effectiveness of both the PA and overall PMS on personnel within this military branch.

Theoretical framework

Motivation

The PMS is implemented to serve as a motivational tool in line with the Goal-setting Theory, Equity and Expectancy Theories; however, that is not always the case. Motivation is, according to Bakar et al. (2022) and Lokman et al. (2022), a complex human psychology aspect that involves decisions by individuals on how they spend their time, the amount of effort or energy they put into the activity, their perceptions and feelings about the activity and their persistence to reach the set objectives. From the PMS perspective, motivation is influenced by the perception of fairness or equity in the allocation of rewards (Bakar et al., 2022; Lokman et al., 2022). This directly relates to the SAAF as employees' reactions to

their experiences with PMS are contingent upon the equitable distribution of rewards, training, developmental opportunities, feedback and career progression (Du Plessis & Van Niekerk, 2017; George, 2016; Modipane et al., 2019; Ramulumisi et al., 2015). When employees feel satisfied with the relationship between their input and outcomes in terms of performance, their job satisfaction increases, and their performance consistently remains high (Dong & Loang, 2023; Sofiyan et al., 2022; Sudin, 2011).

Goal-setting, equity and expectancy theories

Under the Goal-setting Theory, the PMS should set goals and determine rewards linked to the attainment of those goals. Meetings or exceeding targets result in rewards while challenging targets lead to developmental opportunities. After linking with the Goal-setting Theory, people become motivated to reach for the goal based on their expected results or outcomes (Vroom, 1964). This means that employees perform well and as expected because of the expected outcome (instrumentality), which is usually in the form of either extrinsic or intrinsic rewards. When employees do not have a clear link between effort and performance, between performance and rewards (attractive or unattractive) or between the rewards and their individual needs, they will not perform exceedingly well (valence) (Lokman et al., 2022; Vroom, 1964). Moreover, employees will perform even higher when they perceive the distribution of rewards to be fair, just and equitable (Adams, 1963), implying that their efforts (inputs) are perceived to match the outcome (salary) (Kollmann et al., 2020). The SAAF might be struggling to ensure that clear goals are set during the contracting PMS sessions with performance standards linked to rewards (Utomo & Fathurrahman, 2022) and, finally, the rated performance being rewarded as expected without any deviations, thus leading to a committed and motivated workforce (Cascio & Aguinis, 2019; Jiang et al., 2017; Makhubela et al., 2016) because of the military's serving culture (Woods, 2012).

Both Equity and Expectancy Theories emphasise fairness in the allocation of rewards. The Equity Theory advocates for equal distribution for equal performance and different rewards for different performances (Adams, 1965), while the Expectancy Theory stresses the importance of delivering rewards as promised or expected, without any deviations. The Expectancy Theory can be realised by linking performance with rewards and clearly stating that specific performance levels will yield certain rewards (Vroom, 1964). For example, a final score of 3 leads to a notch increase only, while scores of 4 and 5 lead to a notch increase plus a bonus. Transparency is essential for fulfilling the Equity Theory, as high-performing employees should be able to see that they received more rewards than average performers. However, it should be noted that there are other factors that an effective PMS promotes, such as performance feedback, training, development and education, career progressions and promotions for employees, rather than tangible rewards.

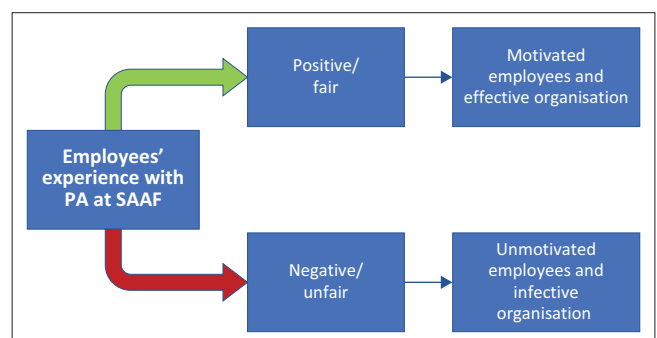
Perceived organisational justice

The PAs between line managers and subordinates (interpersonal justice), during contracting (informational justice), during rating sessions (procedural justice) and the allocation of rewards (distributive justice) should always be conducted in a fair and just manner. Studies have found that a positive relationship exists between perceived organisational justice and individual job performance (Earley & Lind, 1987; Colquitt et al., 2001; Jufrizen & Kandhita, 2021; Sofiyan et al., 2022). In a study by Sudin (2011), it was concluded that the final PA session in the PMS can only be perceived as fair when both distributive and informational justice are experienced. When the final rating is viewed as fair, it is more likely to be accepted. It was also concluded that supervisors and the entire PMS process are seen as fair when distributive, interpersonal and informational justice are present during the final appraisal session, leading to overall satisfaction with the overall PMS (Sofiyan et al., 2022; Sudin, 2011). If employees at the SAAF perceive the PA negatively, the SAAF is unlikely to have high-performing employees or be a highly productive organisation (as shown in Figure 1).

Employee's experiences with the performance appraisal sessions and their consequences

The current study aimed to explore the employees' experiences, either negative (unfair) or positive (fair) with PA at the SAAF and propose solutions, as seen in the conceptual framework (Figure 1).

Performance management systems are operationalised through performance contracts that establish performance goals aligned with the Goal-setting Theory. These goals are directly linked to potential rewards, creating an expectancy for employees to achieve these targets, as framed by the Expectancy Theory. It is incumbent upon the organisation and line managers to ensure that performance ratings are allocated objectively and that the procedures are perceived as equitable and just by all the employees, reflecting principles from Equity Theory and Organisational Justice Theory. A failure to uphold these standards may result in employee demotivation, which can subsequently lead to declines in organisational performance. This correlation has been substantiated in various studies (Colquitt et al., 2001; Dong & Loang, 2023; George, 2016; King, 2020; Mishra, 2022; Sofiyan et al., 2022; Sudin, 2011).



PA, performance appraisals; SAAF, South African Air Force.

FIGURE 1: Conceptual framework.

In line with the previous studies mentioned above, the current research argues that the perceived lack of performance at the SAAF might be a direct result of employees experiencing the implemented PMS and its PA negatively because they are seen as unworthy and unable to produce undesired results (Javidmehr & Ebrahimpour, 2015) and because they cannot be implemented fairly and accurately (Kampkötter, 2017). The PA's general ratings are biased (Adler et al., 2016; Joseph, 2014). Lastly, the PA's outcomes are subjective (Ferreira & Otley, 2009), among other issues, leading to low job satisfaction, organisational commitment and reduced productivity, as well as high turnover, absenteeism and organisational citizenship behaviour (Colquitt et al., 2001; Dong & Loang, 2023; George, 2016; Mishra, 2022; Murphy, 2020). This also results in perceptions of organisational injustice (Du Plessis & Van Niekerk, 2017; Klinck & Swanepoel, 2019; Makhubela et al., 2016). The current study aimed to explore the employees' experiences, whether negative or positive, with the performance appraisals at the SAAF and to propose solutions. This was achieved through the following research design and methods.

Research design

This section provides an overview of this study's research approach, strategies and methods.

Research approach and strategy

To address the research questions and objectives, the study utilised a qualitative design with a phenomenological strategy and exploratory approach to investigate the lived experiences of the SAAF employees. This choice was appropriate for exploring unknown phenomena with limited existing literature (Busetto et al., 2020; Mbaka & Isiramen, 2021).

Research method

The study followed a qualitative research design to accurately answer the research objective of exploring human beings' lived experiences with PAs at the SAAF. Furthermore, the study followed both the phenomenological approach and exploratory strategy and also used semi-structured interviews as the primary data collection method (Singh, 2021). By combining open-ended and standardised questions, these interviews enabled in-depth exploration of the phenomenon while maintaining a consistent framework for data collection (Saunders et al., 2016).

Research process

This section focuses on the actual steps taken by the researchers to conduct the study and reach the results as reported.

Research setting

The study was conducted at the SAAF, Head Office in Pretoria.

Entrée and establishing researcher roles

The primary researcher approached the SAAF Head Office based in Gauteng, Pretoria, to seek permission to interview employees and the permission was granted. The main researcher was an employee at the SAAF, which made it convenient for the researcher to access the participants. The primary researcher employed strategies such as bracketing and rich descriptions to remain objective, as advised by Ruslin et al. (2022). To prevent undue influence, the human resource management (HRM) department at the SAAF on behalf of the researchers informed all employees within the SAAF about the researcher's Master's study project seeking assistance from all employees within the SAAF.

Research participants and sampling methods

From the population of over 10 000 SAAF employees, the researcher employed non-probability purposive and convenience sampling to select participants who could share their experiences with more than one PA session at the SAAF. The primary researcher, upon approval granted, approached potential participants based on the valuable information they could provide. Appointments were made to interview the available participants. The following participants were interviewed (as shown in Table 1).

Data recording

For later verbatim, the transcriptions were kept for analysis purposes. The interviews were recorded using an audio recording device for later transcription after the participants consented by signing the informed consent form.

Data collection methods and analysis

As mentioned above, a semi-structured interview protocol was used to collect qualitative data (Ruslin et al., 2022). This approach allows the researchers to direct participants' responses towards the research questions that need to be answered while also granting participants the status of knowledge producers (Belina, 2023). The researcher conducted interviews until data collection reached saturation at the 10th participant, and data collection was ultimately stopped at the 11th available participant (refer to Table 1). The saturation point was reached when collecting more data do not add new information (Tight, 2024). The interviews

TABLE 1: Participants' demographics.

Employee pseudonyms	Gender	Race	Age (years)	Position in the organisation	Number of years employed
Participant 1	Male	Asian person	38	Employee	16
Participant 2	Female	Black person	38	Line manager	18
Participant 3	Male	White person	49	Line manager	24
Participant 4	Male	Coloured person	55	Line manager	32
Participant 5	Male	White person	35	Employee	17
Participant 6	Male	Black person	39	Employee	16
Participant 7	Female	Black person	36	Employee	14
Participant 8	Female	Coloured person	44	Line manager	26
Participant 9	Male	White person	48	Line manager	29
Participant 10	Female	White person	48	Line manager	28
Participant 11	Female	Coloured person	47	Line manager	27

were limited to employees who had been at the SAAF for at least 5 years to gather rich and experienced details about their experiences with PA sessions at the SAAF.

The following main research questions, over the biographical questions, were asked:

- *What is your understanding of the PMS?*
- *How were your experiences with the PA sessions at the SAAF over the years?*
- *Based on your overall experiences, what would be your recommendations for the SAAF to improve its implemented PMS system and, more specifically, the PA sessions and their outcomes?*

In qualitative studies, data analysis begins during data collection, allowing researchers to determine when no new data emerge from the interviews (Hennink & Kaiser, 2022). This indicates a phenomenon known as code saturation, meaning that the researchers have 'heard it all' and no new information seemed to have emerged from the interviews (Hennink & Kaiser, 2022; Tight, 2024). The primary researcher verbatim transcribed the audio-recorded interviews before commencing with data analysis. Data were analysed using the inductive content analysis (ICA) method through the inductive coding technique to allow the emergence of new information (Hennink & Kaiser, 2022; Kyngäs, 2019; Tight, 2024). The ICA method first identifies or presents open codes; codes are mixed with other or similar open codes to form themes and then themes are presented to the audience (Braun & Clark, 2006; Dawadi, 2020; Kyngäs, 2019). To interpret the collected data effectively, the study employed the interpretive paradigm, which focused on creating meaning based on people's subjective experiences of the external environment (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Kumatongo & Muzata, 2021).

Strategies employed to ensure data quality and integrity

To ensure high standards of trustworthiness and rigour in this qualitative study, the primary researcher collaborated with a secondary researcher to conduct a thorough literature review to triangulate the findings. Later the primary researcher collaborated with the secondary researcher as a co-coder for data triangulation, thereby ensuring the credibility and confirmability of the results (Campbell & Domene, 2024; Gao et al., 2023; Kyngäs et al., 2020). Triangulation was used to increase the depth of the investigation by involving multiple investigators, allowing for the recognition of multiple realities when exploring unknown phenomena (Donkoh & Mensah, 2023). Bracketing, also known as self-reflexive practice, was employed during the literature review, data collection and data analysis stages by setting aside preconceived ideas through journaling. Additionally, the researchers critically reflected on their beliefs, attitudes and biases to avoid clouding their analytical and reporting abilities. This was done to ensure the generalisability and transferability of the findings to similar settings, as advised by Finefetter-Rosenbluh (2017).

Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance to conduct this study was obtained from the University of South Africa, Department of Industrial and Organisational Psychology Research Ethics Committee (No. 2023_CEMS_IOP_0378). The researcher obtained permission from the SAAF to conduct the semi-structured interviews or collect data. The researchers used the SAAF letter to obtain ethical clearance from the University of South Africa, Industrial and Organisational Psychology Department Ethics Research Committee (IOP ERC). Before commencing the data collection, a written informed consent was issued to the participants to sign or give consent to be interviewed and recorded. The de-identifier such as pseudonyms was used to identify the participants and hide their real identities as mentioned in the informed consent.

Results

The participants were asked a series of comprehensive and purpose-driven questions to steer them towards their experiences with how the PA at the SAAF and to propose solutions thereof. After data analysis, the following themes and subthemes emerged as the results (as shown in Table 2).

Themes and subthemes

In this section, the themes and subthemes as shown in Table 2 are fully described using verbatim quotes.

Theme 1: Experiences with performance management system

Subtheme 1: Demotivating: The PAs are systematically meant to determine the final rating that determines the kind and number of rewards and bonuses an employee will be entitled to, based on the employee's past performance. It appears that employees at the SAAF, PAs are demotivated because of the favouritism and biasedness they perceive and the inadequate rewards they get even if they perform exceptionally well:

'It is not a motivational tool. It is just a tool that we need to use to assess the members. What happens is when it comes to performance bonuses, the members that do not deserve it, they get the bonuses instead of the member that is working hard.' (P4, Male, Coloured person, 55)

TABLE 2: Results: Themes and subthemes.

Question	Theme	Subtheme
How were your experiences with the PAs at the SAAF over the years?	Theme 1: Experiences with performance management system	Subtheme 1: Demotivating Subtheme 2: Unfair and biased
Based on your overall experiences, what would be your recommendations for the SAAF to improve its implemented PMS and more specifically the PA sessions and their outcomes?	Theme 2: Solutions	Subtheme 1: Training Subtheme 2: Removal of the quota system Subtheme 3: Frequent Appraisals or Feedback Subtheme 4: Link PMS with development

PA, performance appraisals; SAAF, South African Air Force; PMS, performance management system.

'It's killing the morale, it's either the PMDS I do not know. I think, if it was up to me, I think that they would have to go back to the drawing board and come up with a new concept. I do not see it as a motivation because I've never got a bonus, but I still come to work. I still work hard, so I do not see the motivation. More than anything else, I see it as a discouragement for those who are working hard and not getting anything at the end of the day and not being recognised saying you're doing good work.' (P7, Female, Black person, 36)

'It is failing as a motivational tool Because it's being used in a biased way. And instead of recognising those members who are performing outstandingly, we are generalising because we are lazy.' (P8, Female, Coloured person, 44)

'Not at all, not currently, it is not a motivational tool, it is not motivating anyone. We are just there to implement it. I would even say for the sake of the 2% because if you do not do it, you won't get the 2% pay progression. So, currently, it's only done for the 2%.' (P3, Male, White person, 49)

Subtheme 2: Unfair and biased: Moreover, the participants stated that during the PAs, the performance scores are determined based on the line managers' personal or subjective feelings other than the actual performance; hence the employees seem to experience the PA sessions at the SAAF as unfair and biased:

'I've sat in a few of these moderation meetings where people say no I do not like this mark take it down. No, you do not deserve it because of the manager's personal feelings. The moderation process is biased.' (P1, Male, Asian person, 38)

'Normally, members that do not perform, they are getting the bonuses due to the fact of how they work out. we must get how many of those rank how many colour of this colour, How many age and all this.' (P4, Male, Coloured person, 55)

'If used correctly, yes. If implemented according to how it should be implemented and not biased and no friends try to get the bonus this year. Then, yes, it can.' (P8, Female, Coloured person, 44)

Theme 2: Solutions

As a comprehensive and in-depth study, the researchers went further and asked the participants to recommend ways to improve the effectiveness or efficiency of the PA. The participants shared that training of the line managers to ensure fair allocation of resources and elimination of bias and favouritism, provision of adequate and frequent feedback by line managers (informational and procedural justices) and finally the perceived links between performance and rewards.

Subtheme 1: Training: Line managers as the final arbiters should be well trained to mitigate their rater bias (critical incident, halo effects, etc.) and personal biases and favouritism they are likely to encounter. Moreover, all employees at the SAAF should be trained about the strategic nature of the PMS and their role as individual employees in the organisational performance:

'I think personally, starting from the PMDS, the people should get proper training on how to complete a PMDS and what it is there for, how to use the tool successfully, so you can implement stuff like we talked about, like developmental early identification of training courses and such. Because if like a workman he knows how to use his tools, he will do a good job. Currently, we do not know how to use the PMDS correctly. So, we're not doing a good job of using the PMDS. So that to me, it doesn't help that give us a short session in the hall on how to do the PMDS by somebody by HR [*Human Resources*], it also doesn't know what's going on, you know, so that to me is the issue for PMDS, you know.' (P9, Male, White person, 48)

'Yeah, I think training can help, not just training per se. People need to understand that. You must own it. So, it's not just about training for the supervisor, this PMDS should have been presented on all the courses in every single post in the Defence Force. Because if you buy into your performance, this won't be a problem. So, it's a good beginning to present the physical practical PMDS training in every course in the Defence Force.' (P10, Female, White person, 48)

Subtheme 2: Removal of the quota system: The PMS should be implemented fairly and without bias or favouritism, eliminating the quota system as well:

'I feel they must take race and gender out of the picture. Purely work on a person, a member of a squadron or the workplace and then see why they scored so high and what did to get those high marks and then say, base your performance or the bonus that he has to receive on all that work that he does, apart from the normal work that he gets paid to do. So, they must focus more on what that person did. And not skin colour and all those things.' (P5, Male, White person, 35)

'The quota systems seem to contribute to challenges and doing away with it, becomes a solution: The race thing comes in again, you understand? Because we're certain races there's more percentage or bigger percentage and for others. For me, it should not be about percentages, but it must be about performance meritocracy, based on merit only.' (P8, Female, Coloured person, 44)

Subtheme 3: Frequent appraisals or feedback: The participants indicated that frequent PA sessions could be beneficial as it will provide much-needed performance feedback and effort and the opportunity for improvement before the final PA sessions where ratings are allocated:

'I think following through on the shortfalls of a member if you have marked me low on a certain aspect, try to assist me in getting better in that aspect. Have interviews with the members once every quarter. So, you can see if there is improvement in certain areas.' (P6, Male, Black person, 39)

'For them to be done frequently. Not to be done just once a year, even twice a year. It's not enough frequently so that we can get used to evaluating our members and re-evaluating like revisiting how we evaluated them, let's say now the first evaluation in their first team and then we go back to looking into now the second evaluation if the guy has improved from what he has achieved in term one so that can give us like a clear indication if we are getting better or not.' (P2, Female, Black person, 38)

Subtheme 4: Link performance management system with development: The final proposed solution for successful PA session implementation suggests that the PMS at the SAAF should be redesigned to ensure that its objectives are linked to the employee's personal development plans. This means that every employee will enjoy using the system and have a chance to develop according to their performance needs, as noted in the quotes below:

'All these challenges can be eliminated. If there is a system that is user friendly' (P4) and the long document shortened: 'We have a 34 Pager of I do not know how many different things that have to happen. But it doesn't make things better. I prefer the seven-pager with the straightforward questions, yes or no? That that applied to everybody' (P8).

'There are specific developmental plans you must complete with the PMDS to ensure that the training or the necessary training is conducted within the workplace to ensure that this member is up to scratch and getting to a level where he is, appropriate for his rank level' (P9).

Discussion

The following section discusses the findings of the study by incorporating the existing literature.

Experiences with the performance management system

The experiences of employees with the PMS at the SAAF have been characterised as demotivating. This observation is consistent with prior research (Ahmad, 2020; Du Plessis & van Niekerk, 2017; Gunputh et al., 2017; Kumar & Raju, 2017; Pan et al., 2018). Recent studies by Govender and Bussin (2020) and Gupta and Sethi (2024) further corroborated these findings, suggesting that PMS may not always achieve its intended goal of enhancing employee motivation. Within the SAAF, the entrenched 'serving' culture, coupled with a quota-based system for reward allocation, often results in perceptions of injustice (Pan et al., 2018). These insights may present a challenge for the SAAF management, as they signal a significant shift in the employees' perceptions regarding both the 'serving culture' and the allocation of rewards. Additionally, these findings raise important issues related to affirmative action, wherein individuals from specific racial groups may be unfairly overlooked for rewards, despite demonstrated performance. Such findings are in alignment with expectancy and equity theories, which underscore the necessity of delivering on performance expectations and ensuring equitable distribution of rewards (Adams, 1965; Armstrong, 2015; Vroom, 1964). Similar patterns of unjust and inequitable PMS implementation, attributable to the intentional biases of line managers, have also been identified in recent research (Erickson et al., 2022; Klinck & Swanepoel, 2019).

Solutions

The participants underscored the critical role of training line managers in enhancing the credibility of the PMS at the SAAF.

This finding is consistent with prior research that emphasises the importance of equipping line managers with the necessary skills for an effective PMS (Aguinis, 2019; Blanchard & Thacker, 2023; George, 2016; Kehoe & Han, 2020; Lawler, 2003; McAfee & Champagne, 1993). Furthermore, the participants identified the fair allocation of rewards and resources as a pivotal strategy for improving the PMS (Sharma et al., 2016). Such equitable practices contributed to a positively perceived PMS, which in turn foster employee commitment and engagement (Adams, 1963; Schaufeli & Salanova, 2007). The importance of providing frequent feedback during the PAs was also emphasised by the participants, as this can lead to effective outcomes and overall enhancement of the PMS (Lawler, 2003). A strong recommendation emerged for the removal of the quota system at the SAAF as a means of eliminating discrimination and ensuring fairness in the PA outcomes (Elbanna & Fatima, 2023). Nevertheless, it is pertinent to acknowledge that the quota system may be entrenched within the existing organisational culture at the SAAF (Ahmed, 2020). Finally, the participants indicated that linking the PMS with employee development constitutes an effective strategy for achieving a functional PMS in general (Dewettinck & Van Dijk, 2013; Schaufeli & Salanova, 2007). Overall, the findings reinforce the proposition that perceived organisational justice, encompassing informational, procedural, interpersonal and distributive dimensions is positively correlated with improved employee performance (Sofiyan et al., 2022), thereby supporting the SAAF in fulfilling its mandate.

Implications

The findings from this study bring about practical changes to the PMS policy implemented at the SAAF, currently, making changes to the number and frequency of the PA sessions as well as the quota system. The findings call for the training of line managers and the involvement of all relevant stakeholders when the PMS policy gets redesigned. Moreover, the policy should be revised to ensure proper alignment of individual performance with organisational strategy and individual development plans for career growth purposes. Theoretically, the study provides valuable information regarding PMS in the military or any other related command-related uniformed context. The study laid a theoretical foundation for future studies in similar areas around PMSs. Moreover, the theories and research methods employed in this study may now be used in the same or more similar context to explore PMS issues and valuable contributions.

The findings were new information to the limited research on PMS in the military in South Africa and globally.

Limitations and recommendations

The following *limitations* are presented:

- The sample size was smaller; however, according to Borgstede and Scholz (2021), this is not a major concern because the aim of qualitative studies is to extrapolate findings in a similar context rather than to generalise.

- The study was qualitative and used once-off data collection methods, which might have limited the richness of information the participants provided, as compared to longitudinal studies. However, the rich descriptive methods employed during data collection and analysis provided credibility and transferability of the findings.
- Researcher bias might have contributed some bias during the literature review while collecting and analysing data. However, methods such as triangulation of data using a co-coder and bracketing to make sure that the results have rigour and trustworthiness as suggested by Sabnis and Wolgemuth (2024) and Scholtz et al. (2020).

Recommendations

A similar study can be conducted in other military branches within the SANDF using the same or different research design and methods (quantitative, descriptive, mixed methods and longitudinal) to make conclusions as compared to the current study.

Conclusion

The South African Air Force management should consider a comprehensive redesign of the PMS policy to incorporate more frequent PAs and ongoing feedback, rather than relying solely on annual evaluations. Additionally, it is crucial to eliminate discriminatory practices associated with the quota system. Following the revision of the PMS, all stakeholders, especially line managers, should be provided with training to ensure that performance evaluations are conducted objectively, minimising subjectivity in the assessment process.

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Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

Authors' contributions

B.O. gathered all information for the thesis, collected data and analysed data under the supervision of M.A.M. The supervisor prepared the articles with the help of B.O. from inception until completion. Review edits were also attended to by B.O. and M.A.M.

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Data availability

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, M.A.M., upon reasonable request.

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