

Reducing Bias and Strengthening Objectivity in Performance Appraisal: A Thematic Analysis

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Abstract: Appraisals are fundamental to the management of human resources since they affect the development of an employee, the organizational fairness, and the advancement in one's career. However, performance appraisal systems tend to lack precision due to biases that adversely impact trust, fairness, accuracy, and objectivity. This thesis aims to analyze reasons for biases in performance appraisal and determine practical methods to improve objectivity using action-oriented thematic analysis. Following qualitative literature synthesis, three overarching themes were identified: biases associated with raters, alterations proposed to enhance structures and processes, and use of technology. Findings highlight biases such as halo bias, age, ethnicity and gender biases, and leniency bias are steeped in cultural and organizational deep cognitive frameworks. An increase in measurement precision is essential in overcoming biases using Z-ethically acceptable design, CPM systems, automated feedback BARS, AI, and analytics. It is emphasized that technological frameworks must be approached from the standpoint of fairness, devoid of historical inequity perpetuation. Ultimately, the argument presented in the text underscores the complexity of the intervention using systems approach combining governance by ethical machine systems with human retraining, organizational strategy redesign, and allegiance to bounding policies for structural fairness, openness, inclusion, and objectivity.

Keywords: Performance Appraisal, Bias Mitigation, Objectivity, Rater Training, Behaviorally Anchored Rating Scales (BARS), 360-Degree Feedback, Continuous Performance Management (CPM), Organizational Fairness, Systemic Discrimination

Introduction

As an integral human resource management function, bringing an organizational performance appraisal system into practice helps to assess, instruct, and elevate employee work outcomes. The implementation of performance appraisal systems, however, is often overshadowed by concerns regarding accuracy and fairness due to subjective biases. Such biases not only affect appraisal accuracy, but also heavily influence motivation levels, trust in organizational leadership, and the

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prevailing sense of organizational justice (Aguinis, 2013). In light of the absence of fair evaluation systems, this paper aims to address some thematic perspectives focusing on the reduction of bias and enhancement of objectivity in performance appraisal systems. This study has been conducted using a qualitative thematic analysis approach, drawing from the available literature to identify recurring patterns and themes pertaining to bias mitigation and objectivity reinforcement.

Literature Review

Bias in performance appraisal often refers to a systematic distortion of performance evaluative ratings in a manner that is inconsistent with the actual level of organizational performance attributable to an evaluator's pre-existing notions, biases, or attitudes (DeNisi & Murphy, 2017). Well-accepted categories of bias include leniency and severity errors, halo and horn effects, akin-to-me bias, gender and race-based biases, and recency biases. These biases not only obstruct the broader organizational goals of performance evaluation, but they also undermine the development of organizational talent and equitable opportunities for promotion (Pulakos et al., 2015).

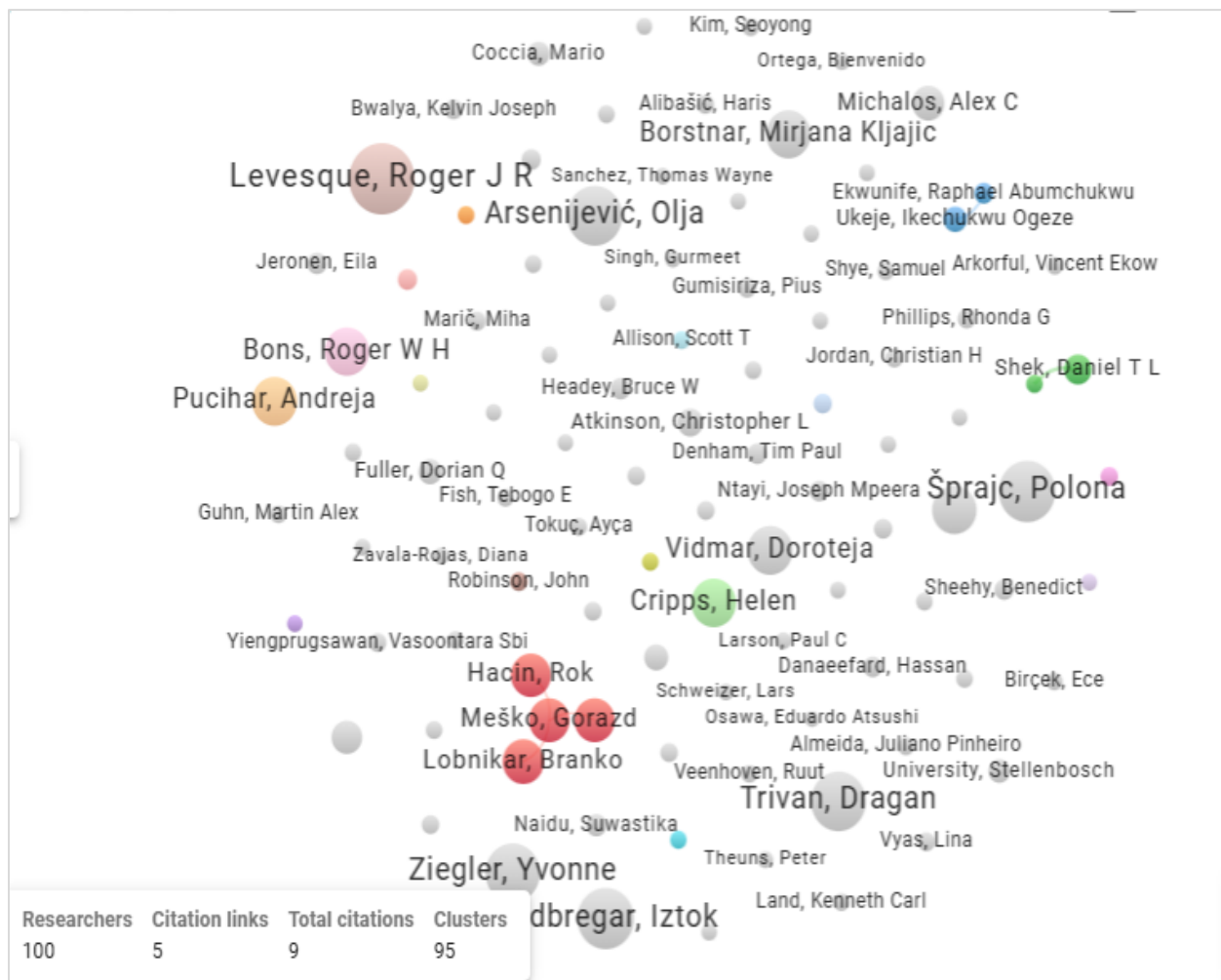


Figure 1: Citation Analysis of key studies in this field using VosViewer. Source: Originally created

Figure 1 illustrates a co-citation network comprising the 95 most-cited authors in bias mitigation research. This was generated with a minimal threshold of 9 citations per author and at least 5 co-citation links per pair. Each node reflects an individual author, and its size depicts total citations while color represents one of the distinct research clusters. Prominent nodes such as Levesque RJR, Arsenijević Olja, and Šprajc Polona hold central positions, attesting to their high citation counts and co-citation relationships. Additionally, the grouping of similarly colored nodes serves to illustrate the thematic subfields present within the broader literature.

The halo effect is one of the most extensively analyzed types of bias. It stems from an employee's single attribute—punctuality, in this case, positively influencing the appraiser's perception of other facets of that employee's performance. The opposite is true of the horn effect, where a negative impression fails to justify unduly lower ratings in unrelated performance areas. Biases of this nature weaken the appraisal's reliability and as a result, demotivation and disengagement occur among employees (Bretz et al., 1992).

Gender and racial biases persist in contemporary workplaces. Evidence suggests women and minorities tend to be evaluated less favorably because of the evaluators' unacknowledged stereotypes (Joshi et al., 2015). These stereotypes may be covertly harmful, such as men receiving greater attribution for achievements due to a perceived high level of skill while women's success is viewed as luck or dependent on a team's efforts. Efforts aimed at providing objective benchmarks alongside cognitive bias training tend to be proposed as countermeasures, yet the literature converges to mixed empirical findings about their efficacy (Heilman & Caleo, 2018).

Thematic Analysis Approach

Scholars have not adequately addressed bias and objectivity in performance appraisal while considering existing literature. This gap in scholarly work is what the current paper intends to discuss. In explaining this gap, I will first analyze Braun and Clarke's definition of thematic analysis. In 2006, Braun and Clarke defined thematic analysis as a qualitative method that analyzes the data sets by identifying the themes. Analyzing the data sets requires going through a few steps. These steps include familiarization with the content, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing the themes, defining and naming the themes, and generating the report. For the objective of this paper, relevant scholarly articles, practitioner reports, and peer-reviewed case studies were analyzed to derive the patterns.

While analyzing the data through thematic analysis, some overarching themes were formed. The Rater-Related Issues, Structural and Procedural Reforms, and Technological Interventions and Data Analytics are the three thematic issues discussed in this paper. These themes are elaborated further in the subsequent sections to explain the reasons for appraisal bias and the ways to achieve a higher level of objectivity.

Table 1 captures the thematic analysis framework aimed at mitigating bias and increasing objectivity. It provides a comprehensive account of the three main themes: Rater-Related Factors, Structural and Procedural Reforms, and Technological Interventions and Data Analytics, complete with their subthemes, pertinent citations, and descriptive excerpts, illustrating how systematic performance evaluations can be optimized for accuracy and impartiality.

Table 1: Thematic Analysis Framework for Minimizing Bias and Enhancing Objectivity for Enhancement

Theme	Sub-themes/Patterns	Supporting References	Sample Quotes/Examples
Rater-Related Factors	• Rater Training Programs • Unconscious Bias Sensitization • Reliance on Heuristics	Bernardin & Beatty, 1984; Sulsky & Day, 1992 King et al., 2009	Raters often rely on cognitive shortcuts when assessing multiple employees.
Structural and Procedural Reforms	• Behaviourally Anchored Rating Scales • 360-Degree Feedback Systems • Continuous Performance Management	Smith & Kendall, 1963; Pulakos, 2009 Bracken et al., 2001 Cappelli & Tavis, 2016	BARS link performance ratings to specific behaviours.
Technological Interventions and Data Analytics	• HR Analytics • AI and Machine Learning Algorithms • Digital Performance Dashboards	Levenson, 2018; Pulakos et al., 2015 Kellogg et al, 2020	AI tools identify anomalies and suggest performance scores objectively

Thematic Analysis

Theme 1: Rater-Related Factors

Subjectivity shown by human raters is perhaps the greatest source of bias within each evaluation. Often, biases of this nature are sown due to mental shortcuts, some level of emotional response, or engrained stereotypes. Relying on heuristics is common for many raters, especially during time-constrained multi-evaluations, as noted by Cardy and Dobbins in 1994. This type of situation encourages the use of impressionistic and partial, at best, information that is often not reflective of the actual employee performance.

Different forms of bias have led to the introduction of rater training programs. Bernardin and Beatty in 1984 demonstrated how FOR training improved performance accuracy by assisting raters in properly understanding performance dimensions and aligning their calibrated ratings accordingly. Furthermore, bias sensitization is argued to lessen the influence of ingrained attitudes concerning diversity (diversity and inclusiveness) (King et al., 2009). Such training is useful, but widespread application and longitudinal durability remain contested alongside diverse contextual sustainability.

Theme 2: Structural and Procedural Reforms

While the rater-related issues underscore the psychological dimension of biases, the structural and procedural components within a performance appraisal system often deepen these biases or

provide fertile ground for them to develop. Most organizations still rely on traditional periodic performance appraisal systems (usually annual or biannual) which do not offer optimal conditions for thorough and comprehensive assessment of an employee's performance. This often leads to the situation where absence of evaluation criteria results in purely subjective judgments (Pulakos, 2009).

Adding BARS is a proven method to remedy such structural weaknesses. These scales tie listings to specific behaviors that are observable rather than vague characteristics, thus helping the raters to concentrate on the real performance instead of the perception of it (Smith & Kendall, 1963). BARS improve the rating process by providing clear examples so that ambiguity and misconceptions are absent. In the same vein, 360-degree peer review systems which solicit feedback from various participants, including subordinates and superiors, offer a more rounded balanced evaluation. These systems are useful in mitigating bias from individual raters because, with several ratings, discrepancies will likely expose many inconsistencies anomalies and inconsistencies (Bracken et al., 2001).

Effective feedback mechanisms and developmental functions should be distinctively separated. Evaluation functions that serve dual purposes of promotion and coaching may prompt employees to view such evaluations political, biased, or devoid of sincerity, eroding trust in the system (London & Smither, 2002). Organizations achieve these objectives by allowing a more constructive environment that enables honest feedback devoid of fear, bias, as well as promoting fairness and employee development.

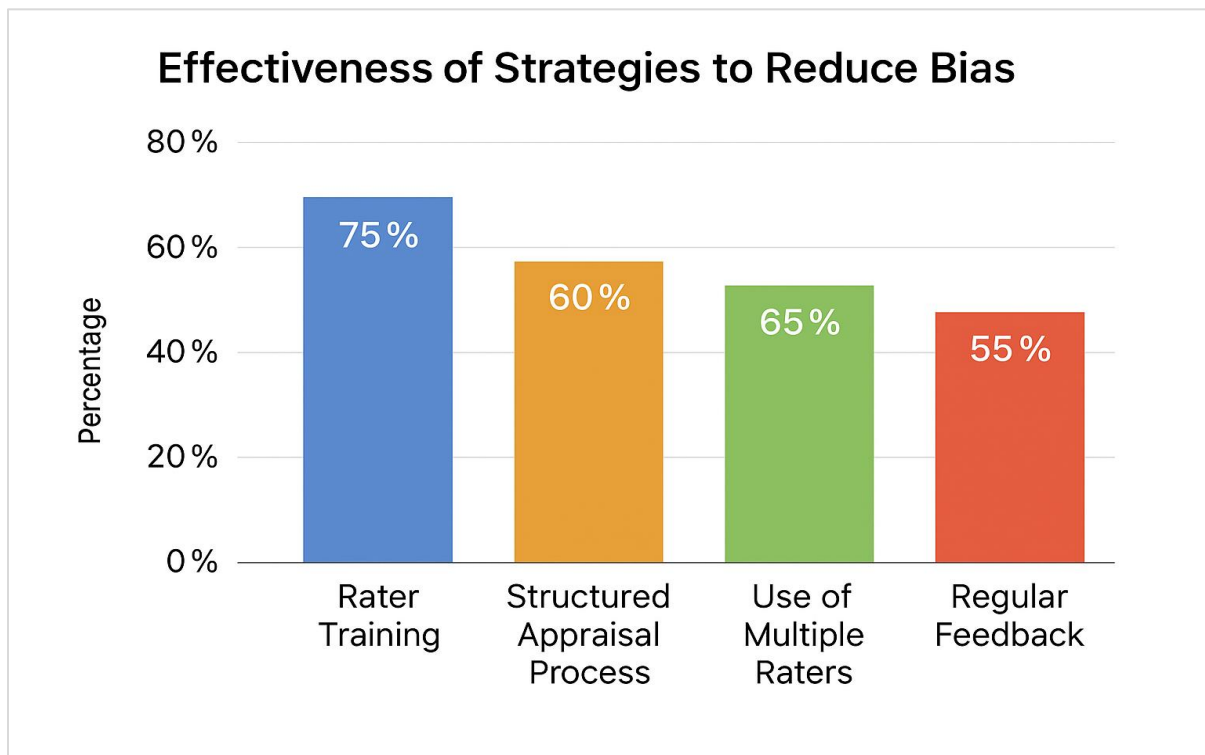


Figure 2: Bar graph comparing Rater Training, Structured Appraisals, Multiple Raters, Regular Feedback

As discussed earlier, Figure 2 depicts the accumulated literature on the perceived effectiveness of 4 key bias reduction strategies. From the comprehensive literature review, rater training leads with an effectiveness rating of 75%. This emphasizes that equipping evaluators with standardized techniques to estimate bias mitigates it more than any other method. Following with 65%, employing multiple raters clearly shows the benefit of different subjective views toward eliminating individual biases. The structured appraisal system at 60% shows the value of explicitly formulated rules paired with logical evaluative procedures, while regular feedback at 55% keeps the rater awake and aware of calibration. Together, these findings warrant focusing first on measures aimed at increasing evaluator competence, as enhanced along with procedural safeguards and feedback loops to preserve impartiality.

Moreover, the adoption of continuous performance management (CPM) systems where feedback, target goals, and performance check-ins are conducted in real time is on the rise. This shift from episodic once-a-year evaluations to ongoing constructive dialogues fosters dynamic and accurate performance measures (Cappelli & Tavis, 2016). It enhances performance evaluation timelines, mitigates recency bias, and aligns organizational and individual performance needs with evolving organizational requirements.

Standardized appraisal templates with the same evaluation criteria across departments promote uniformity in judging all employees regardless of their position. The absence of standardization is a common denominator of deviation among departments, especially in decentralized organizations (DeNisi & Williams, 1988). Thus, finely defined performance yardsticks along with calibrated rating discussions amongst evaluators greatly improve alignment and organizational subjectivity, thus enhancing organizational impartiality.

Theme 3: Technological Data Analysis and Intervention

Technological tools are also being applied to deal with historical biases in performance appraisal due to the increasing digitalization of human resource activities. An example is HR analytics, which can identify rating biases and favoritism. Organizations systematically analyzing longitudinal data concerning performance ratings, promotion, and compensation (Levenson, 2018), Systemic bias is also detected through trends.

Performance appraisal systems are also integrating AI and machine learning tools to recommend performance scores or flag discrepancies. These tools evaluate performance, such as sales, project completion, customer satisfaction, and task execution, as objective performance indicators, creating a basis for evidential evaluation (Kellogg et al., 2020). There is potential to reduce human error when using AI, however, concerns on algorithmic bias need to be addressed through transparent model training and auditing procedures.

Performance dashboards make it possible for appraisers to consolidate performance data over time. This enables employees and their managers to visualize their progress and identify their strengths and weaknesses. Employees also become active participants in automated appraisal discussions. They analyze their performance, set appraisal goals, and determine the time frame in which to achieve the goals. When performance is the primary focus instead of one-time assessments, employees will strive for progress (Pulakos et al., 2015).

Mobile technology has further enhanced the documentation of real-time performance activities by automating the appraisal process through mobile apps for performance reviews and digital evaluation feedback forms and making assessments richer in detail and context. These systems not only enable goal-oriented feedback but also permit feedback from below and across levels, which helps to balance organizational hierarchies (Goler et al., 2016).

These systems, like all other technological approaches, have associated biases. Perceptual biases are bound to exist within technological frameworks. If an organization's technological framework is based on historical data, then it is likely to repeat existing biases embedded in the organization's past practices. This reinforces that an organization must ensure proper ethical management and human intervention when using technology for performance appraisal frameworks.

Discussion

Thematic appraisal as grown from the performance appraisal system outlined earlier reveals the intersection between the psychology of the rater and the technology as well as architecture that underpin the system within a designed organization. At one level, raters are bound by their biases at the iterative level which includes at minimum the halo bias, similarity biases, and stereotypes which are some unseen biases. These biases have organizational implications as they are often fixed in an enduring frame and greatly damage employee advancement and morale in addition to perceptions held about the organizational just.

From the standpoint of human resource management, the study underlines with considerable emphasis the need for institutionalized development of rater instructional designs with structured level bias of heuristics focused on human cognitive error training. FOR training, in which the focus is given to FOR performance evaluation and filling FOR evaluation documents, is noticeable as a training item aimed at calibrated FOR filling FOR evaluation documents has proven to be effective (Sulsky & Day, 1992). There is however an enduring issue concerning the ability of such training. Indeed, myriad cultures within the organization and sociological frameworks often help bias the reinforcing sculptural and organizational social paradigms and therefore the need to enable also sculptural rater instructional design through sculptural periodic retraining is vital.

This document also stresses the contributions of structural reform towards embedding objectivity in the appraisal process. Employees' contribution to an organization is better captured through continuous performance management systems as opposed to annual reviews. These systems encourage prompt feedback and minimize reliance on retrospective recall, thus alleviating recency and primacy effects (Aguinis et al., 2011). Holistic feedback, as opposed to punitive feedback, stimulates developmental growth which, in turn, cultivates learning conversations and candid feedback.

The combined use of behaviorally anchored rating scales (BARS) and 360-degree feedback strengthens objectivity, as they broaden the range of input and anchor ratings to behaviors that can be seen. As a result, these practices partition the communal process of feedback and bias mitigation. However, the use of multi-source feedback systems must be safeguarded to ensure anonymity and encourage constructive comments (Nowack & Mashihi, 2012).

Technological advancements, particularly in artificial intelligence and analytics, offer the most hope for bias reduction. Automated systems can identify discrepancies in evaluation processes, detecting patterns that may signal bias or favoritism. However, AI in this capacity poses unique problems. If left unchecked, historical datasets utilized as training frameworks could propagate gender and racial biases into automated algorithm-driven systems. To quote O'Neil (2016), "algorithms are opinions embedded in code." Tools lacking ethical standards can become powerful AI tools shrouding ever-deepening bias within unexplainable layers of complex calculations and, as such, become biased devoid of oversight.

Furthermore, mobile feedback software applications have a modernizing effect on work by aiding supervision and attendance monitoring. These instruments support management by objectives and enhance perspectives of longitudinal performance through comprehensive evidence-based management. If these tools are used as intended, the communication between lower and higher management structures becomes more constructive, which leads to increased confidence and participation in organizational goals amongst employees.

This research covers broader issues within organizational leadership because the objectivity of performance appraisal is correlated with employee engagement, retention, equity, and fairness in the workplace. Organizational leaders should not forget that they demonstrate fairness-in-action bias boundlessness to others. As Greenhaus et al. (1990) pointed out, biased perception of appraisals is strongly associated with employee dissatisfaction and intention to exit the organization. Thus, organizational leaders are trained and equipped on how to manage bias in evaluations.

This thematic analysis is also suggestive of implications at policy levels. Anti-bias policies should integrate organizational hierarchies and dictate how performance management policies are structured. Moreover, the performance appraisal system ought to exist within a broader framework of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI). Organizational expenditures on audits of appraisal outcomes based on gender, ethnicity, and organizational role expose concealed systemic inequities that can be addressed.

To conclude, addressing bias while enhancing objectivity in performance appraisal is a commitment that requires time from the entire organization. Achieving the objective requires sustained systematic recalibration at every level of the organization including individual raters, policies, and even the technologies employed by the institution.

Table 2 brings to the forefront eight challenges with objective performance appraisal highlighting as interrelated and synergizing obstacles. To start, biases made by raters can stem from the evaluation process itself when an individual evaluator is affected by halo effects, stereotypes, or leans toward a single mark, which as a result makes the ratings inaccurate; secondly, the subjectivity of the criteria refers to the vague definition of performance which make it easy for raters to interpret the performance differently; thirdly, inconsistent application, or the lack of use of systematic appraisal techniques across departments, erodes uniformity and equity; fourth, lack of evaluator training means that many raters do not have the necessary training to effectively make use of bias mitigation tools; fifth, organizational resistance comes from upper-level managers or

HR people who are opposed to changing appraisal systems; sixth, over-dependence on human judgment occurs when the available data-driven tools and analytics are underutilized which results in excessive individual-leeway; seventh, inadequately structured feedback marked by sporadic, vague, or negative feedback undermines employee development; and lastly, administrative overload for funds and time limits lead raters to make snap decisions devoid of in-depth reflective evaluations. These obstacles collectively reveal the extent to which systematic, objective-adjusted, comprehensive reforms are needed in the appraisal processes of services.

Table 2: Challenges in Minimizing Bias and Enhancing Objectivity in Performance Appraisal

Challenge	Explanation
Rater Bias	Personal biases (e.g., halo effect, leniency, stereotypes) distort evaluation accuracy.
Subjectivity of Criteria	Vague or undefined performance metrics lead to inconsistent interpretations across raters.
Inconsistent Implementation	Lack of standard processes across departments weakens fairness and comparability.
Lack of Evaluator Training	Many evaluators are not adequately trained in objectivity or bias mitigation techniques.
Organizational Resistance	Resistance to change from managers or HR systems slows down adoption of improved appraisal models.
Over-reliance on Human Judgment	Without data-driven support or technology, ratings are prone to inconsistency.
Inadequate Feedback Systems	Infrequent or unclear feedback leads to misunderstanding and lack of developmental support.
Time and Resource Constraints	Limited time and administrative burden discourage in-depth, fair, and reflective appraisals.

Conclusion

This report has attempted to identify sources of bias and possible improvements in regarding objectivity with relation to performance appraisal systems. Rater biases such as mental shortcuts, unconscious biases, and the halo effect are not only parasitic but also unjustified domains in the evaluative and developmental functions of performance appraisal systems. Structural inadequacies of an appraisal system, such as a lack of definable criteria, infrequent evaluative feedback, and feedback centralization, create a subjectivity of performance measurement. Ethically applied technology, including data analytics, real-time observation dashboards, and AI insights, tend to offer unbiased solutions. While technology can provide unbiased solutions, human oversight must be integrated to mitigate biased reproduction of objective standards.

In order to cultivate an environment of equity and continual evolution, organizations must deal with the issue on multiple fronts which aids in overall betterment. These include training provision for recognition of bias and its elimination at the level of design retraining bias-appraisal systems

on objective interpersonal interactions devoid of judgment, auto-feedback systems, diverse feedback inclusion, and self-referential feedback dominant systems. Systemic alignment of organizational goals with fairness, foster growth, and openness should also be heavily integrated at these levels.

To conclude, strategical enhancement of bias mitigation and increasing objectivity in performance appraisal is key. Personally, it shapes career paths while sculpting trust, engagement and inclusivity within the organization vertically. As this analysis depicts, such systems require holistic integration of primary psychological constructs, organizational systems, and technology sculpted into one.

Recommendations

Figure 3 presents a pie chart depicting all four core strategies aimed at minimizing bias and increasing objectivity in performance appraisal. The four pieces of the pie—Standardized Evaluation Criteria, Rater Training, Continuous Feedback, and Multi-Rater Assessments—illustrate that the literature considers all these interventions as equally important. The author's intent is better captured in these figures; instead of depicting hierarchies in which some elements dominate others, this figure treats all elements equally and shows that without a carefully balanced integration of transparent benchmarks, evaluator training, feedback, and multiple evaluators, no objective appraisal system can be designed.

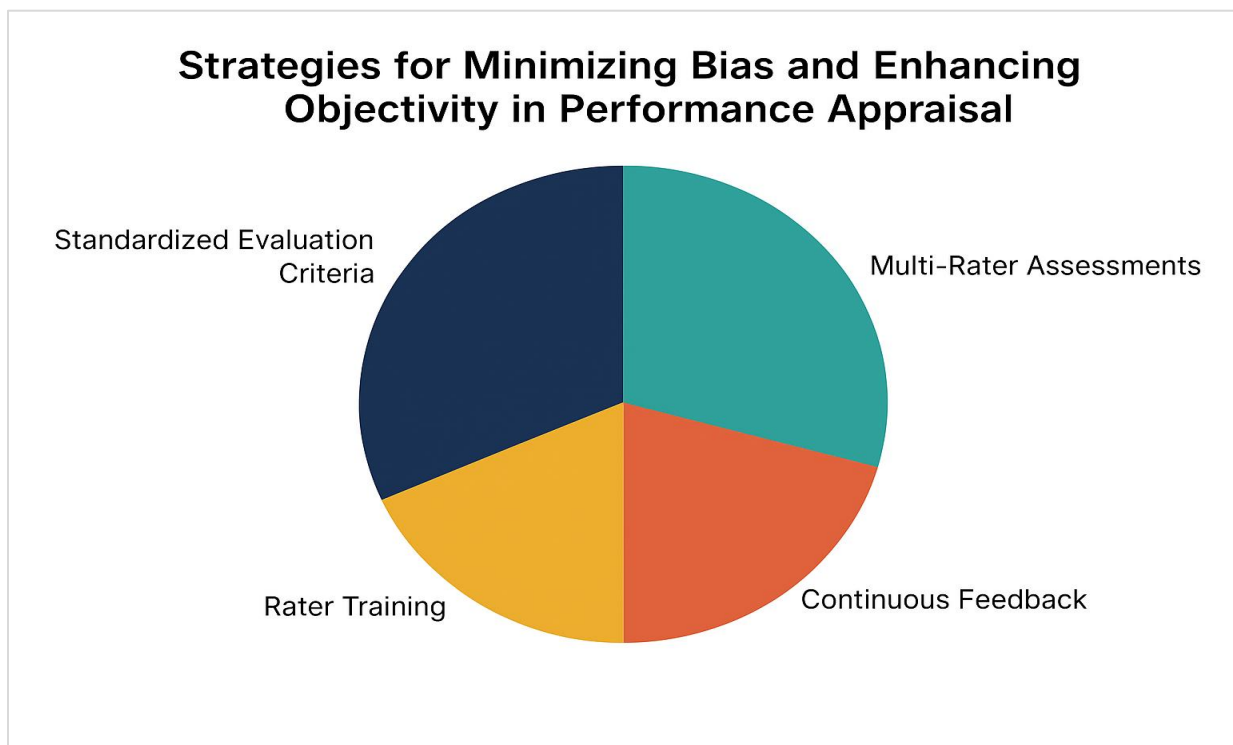


Figure 3: Equal split chart with Standardized Criteria, Rater Training, Continuous Feedback, and Multi-Rater Input

To enhance objectivity in performance appraisal, organizations need to assimilate immediate and ongoing rater training along with bias mitigation workshops. These trainings go beyond basic procedural training because they provide frame-of-reference training where evaluator's mental models of performance are aligned with organizational standards. Additionally, curriculum content must include unconscious bias, stereotype mitigation, and ethical evaluation guidelines that ensure consistency and accuracy to biased assessments.

Furthermore, it is proposed that these organizations eliminate trait-centred evaluations in favour of Behaviourally Anchored Rating Scales (BARS). BARS focus on specific, observable, and measurable actions pertinent to the job which significantly alleviates perception-based evaluation of an employee's work and anchors it on action, hence enhancing appraisal process reliability and validity.

The incorporation of peer, subordinate, and client feedback alongside a manager's evaluation enhances the appraisal accuracy due to the relief biases offered by the managerial viewpoint. This bias alleviation helps garner a more nuanced understanding of the employee's contribution and role in the organization.

The other important achievement is the incorporation of CPM (Continuous Performance Management) with the traditional CPM shaped assessment cadence. Feedback and conversations become proactive, scheduled, and oriented towards upcoming goals, which shifts the focus from post-year assessment to goal-centric interactions. Expectations are structured, feedback is provided instantly, and development is framed in an ongoing active process which makes it progressive.

As technology and AI dominate various performance evaluation sectors, branches of ethical technology need to be integrated. AI systems and analytical tools hold the obligation of exercising transparency and constant monitoring for hidden algorithmic prejudices. Alongside these biases, automated recommendations require human verification to prevent uncontrolled IT oversight while maintaining necessary scrutiny in the review process.

To promote equity proactively, it suffices that businesses periodically review and evaluate their appraisal systems for equity enforcement, bias, and discrimination maintenance. Businesses should be conducting internal audits to trace the gaps identified by demographics to check for patterns of inequity and discrimination concerning ranking systems. These processes need to be adopted by the entire organization to deal with these systemic issues, which is guaranteed to foster an organizational culture that supports the enhancement of performance evaluation processes.

Once again, it is beneficial as stated to make a separation between feedback meant specifically for development and that intended for appraisal of administrative level functions. Any form of discussion that relates to an employee's advancement and growth should be treated differently from promotion, pay rise, or other disciplinary activities. This distinction aids in the development of a non-combat environment wherein employees can openly engage in discussions that are centred on their development without fear of administrative consequences.

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