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## Performance appraisal as a motivational mechanism in public sector HRM: Evidence from a quantitative study.

### Abstract

Performance appraisal systems are central to human resource management, yet limited empirical clarity exists regarding how these systems shape employee motivation within public sector institutions. Although widely institutionalized in bureaucratic environments, performance assessments are often treated as administrative procedures rather than as motivational mechanisms embedded within HR systems. This study quantitatively examines the relationship between job performance assessments and employee motivation within the Limpopo Provincial Legislature in Lebowakgomo.

Using structured survey data from employees operating under a formal appraisal framework, the analysis evaluates the association between appraisal perceptions and motivational outcomes. The findings reveal a significant relationship between job performance assessments and employee motivation, indicating that appraisal systems function as governance mechanisms within public sector HRM. By conceptualizing performance assessment as a structural component of HR systems, the study refines understanding of performance management's behavioral implications in bureaucratic contexts.

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## 1. Introduction

Employees are widely acknowledged as a strategic resource underpinning organizational performance and sustainability. A motivated workforce enhances productivity, strengthens retention, and contributes to a constructive organizational climate (Rahaman et al., 2020). Although financial remuneration is frequently foregrounded as a primary driver of motivation, research consistently demonstrates that perceptions of fairness, working conditions, leadership practices, and opportunities for growth are equally influential in shaping employee engagement and behavioural outcomes (Ali & Anwar, 2021). These factors collectively reinforce the central proposition in human resource management that employee attitudes are significantly shaped by organizational systems and practices.

Within the public sector, however, motivational processes operate within complex institutional environments characterized by bureaucratic procedures, limited resources, and political oversight (Serhan et al., 2018). Such contextual constraints may attenuate engagement and weaken performance if human resource systems are not strategically aligned and effectively implemented. Public institutions therefore face a critical managerial challenge: designing performance management systems that enhance accountability while simultaneously sustaining employee motivation.

Performance assessment represents one of the most visible and consequential HR mechanisms through which this alignment is pursued. In principle, performance appraisal systems evaluate employee contributions, clarify expectations, provide feedback, and identify developmental needs (Limpopo Legislature, 2023). Through these functions, performance assessments signal organizational priorities and shape employees' perceptions of fairness, recognition, and growth. From a motivational perspective, appraisal systems may activate both extrinsic and intrinsic drivers. Extrinsically, they link performance to rewards, recognition, and career advancement. Intrinsically, they reinforce competence, clarify purpose, and provide feedback essential for psychological growth (Deci & Ryan, 2020; Zameer et al., 2014).

However, the literature also highlights a fundamental tension. Traditional public sector appraisal systems often emphasize compliance with predefined standards—such as Key Performance Areas, values, and behavioural indicators—frequently resulting in procedural or “box-ticking” exercises (Limpopo Legislature, 2023). When employees perceive performance evaluations as impervious, punitive, or procedurally unfair, they may experience anxiety and demotivation rather than increased engagement (Naseeb et al., 2019). In contrast, development-oriented appraisal systems that emphasize feedback, coaching, and transparent communication have been shown to strengthen motivational outcomes (Lee, Idris, & Tuckey, 2019; Graham & Buethin, 2018).

This divergence suggests that the motivational consequences of performance assessments are not automatic but contingent upon how systems are structured and experienced. Motivation itself is shaped by a constellation of contextual and psychological factors, including remuneration, interpersonal relationships, management practices, and organizational climate (Serhan et al., 2018). A supportive environment enhances intrinsic engagement, particularly where autonomy, competence, and relatedness are reinforced (Deci & Ryan, 2020). Leadership practices that prioritize empowerment, open communication, and recognition further strengthen employee motivation and performance (Govender & Bussin, 2020; Yin et al., 2020).

Despite the extensive recognition of performance appraisal as a core HR function, empirical research examining its direct relationship with employee motivation in public sector legislative contexts remains limited. Much of the literature conceptualizes motivation broadly or examines performance systems descriptively, without empirically testing their relational dynamics within specific institutional settings. This

gap is particularly salient within the South African public sector, where institutional complexity and governance pressures heighten the importance of effective performance management.

The Limpopo Provincial Legislature in Lebowakgomo provides a pertinent context in which to examine these dynamics. As a constitutional public institution, the Legislature relies on employee performance to execute its strategic mandate. Empirical indications of declining motivation, reduced job satisfaction, and increasing turnover raise questions regarding the effectiveness of the existing performance management system. If performance assessments fail to reinforce motivational mechanisms, they may inadvertently constrain institutional effectiveness.

Positioned within broader debates in human resource management concerning the behavioural consequences of HR systems, this study investigates the relationship between job performance assessments and employee motivation at the Limpopo Provincial Legislature.

Specifically, the study seeks to:

1. Examine the relationship between job performance assessments and employee motivation;
2. Identify the performance assessment tools utilized to enhance motivation; and
3. Determine motivational measures that may support effective performance within the institution.

Drawing on the conceptual distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic motivators (Zameer et al., 2014) and the documented influence of appraisal systems on employee perceptions (Lee et al., 2019; Naseeb et al., 2019), this study advances the following hypothesis:

**H1: There is a statistically significant positive relationship between job performance assessments and employee motivation at the Limpopo Provincial Legislature.**

By empirically testing this relationship within a public legislative setting, this study contributes to HRM scholarship in three ways. First, it extends understanding of how performance management systems function as motivational mechanisms within bureaucratic institutions. Second, it situates performance appraisal within a developing-country public sector context, addressing contextual gaps in the literature. Third, it provides institution-specific evidence relevant to performance management reform in public administration.

In doing so, the study aligns with ongoing scholarly efforts to understand how formal HR practices shape employee attitudes and behavioural outcomes, particularly within institutional environments where accountability and motivation must be balanced.

## 2. Literature Review

### **Performance Assessment and Employee Motivation in the Public Sector**

Employee motivation is widely recognized as a decisive factor in organizational effectiveness (Vallerand & Thill, 1993, cited in Serhan et al., 2018). Within public sector institutions, motivation is shaped by a constellation of workplace conditions, including remuneration, managerial practices, communication quality, interpersonal relations, and opportunities for participation in decision-making (Serhan et al., 2018).

These contextual variables collectively influence employees' psychological states and behavioural outcomes. Motivation is further understood as a multidimensional construct shaped by personal characteristics, job demands, labour market conditions, and organizational climate (Gradišar, 2009; Roussel, 2000, cited in Serhan et al., 2018). A supportive work environment strengthens motivational processes and enhances

performance outcomes. In public institutions, where bureaucratic structures and procedural rigidity often prevail, the design and implementation of human resource systems become particularly critical (Serhan et al., 2018).

Performance assessment represents one such central HR mechanism. In the public sector, assessments typically evaluate employees against predefined standards, including Key Performance Areas, values, attitudes, behavioural competencies, and compliance requirements (Limpopo Legislature, 2023). However, traditional appraisal systems have been criticized for functioning as procedural or “box-ticking” exercises, limiting their developmental value and potentially undermining motivation (Limpopo Legislature, 2023).

Lee, Idris, and Tuckey (2019) argue for a shift toward development-oriented and feedback-intensive performance systems. This perspective aligns with evidence suggesting that when performance evaluations are perceived as punitive, opaque, or unfair, they generate anxiety and demotivation (Naseeb et al., 2019). Conversely, best practices such as multisource feedback, coaching-focused evaluations, and clear performance communication can mitigate negative perceptions and enhance motivational outcomes (Graham & Buethin, 2018).

Collectively, this literature suggests that the motivational consequences of performance assessments depend not only on their existence but on their design, transparency, and developmental orientation.

### **Extrinsic and Intrinsic Motivational Mechanisms**

The conceptual framework of this study draws on the distinction between extrinsic and intrinsic motivators (Zameer et al., 2014).

**Extrinsic motivators**, including compensation, benefits, and formal recognition, play a salient role in the public sector, where financial security and reward fairness are highly valued (Esteve & Schuster, 2019). Empirical work further indicates that access to skill development, recognition, and formal feedback strengthens performance outcomes (Zhang & Liu, 2022; Arulsamy et al., 2023).

**Intrinsic motivators**, by contrast, derive from the work itself. Deci and Ryan (2020) emphasize autonomy, competence, and relatedness as core drivers of intrinsic motivation. Transformational leadership behaviours—characterized by empowerment, support, and recognition—have been shown to enhance job satisfaction and motivation (Yin et al., 2020). A supportive organizational culture further reinforces intrinsic engagement (Cameron & Spreitzer, 2018).

Within this framework, performance assessment systems may function as structural conduits through which both extrinsic (recognition, rewards, promotion signals) and intrinsic (feedback, competence affirmation, growth opportunities) motivational mechanisms are activated. However, where assessments are poorly structured or perceived as unfair, they may disrupt these mechanisms and weaken motivational outcomes (Naseeb et al., 2019).

### **Hypothesis Development**

The reviewed literature establishes three core propositions:

1. Employee motivation significantly influences organizational performance in public institutions (Serhan et al., 2018).
2. Performance assessment systems shape employees’ perceptions of fairness, recognition, development, and feedback (Limpopo Legislature, 2023; Lee et al., 2019).

3. When perceived as developmental, transparent, and supportive, performance evaluations can strengthen motivational processes; when perceived as punitive or opaque, they undermine motivation (Naseeb et al., 2019 ; Graham & Buethin, 2018 ).

Despite these insights, empirical examination of the relationship between job performance assessments and employee motivation within the South African public sector context remains limited, particularly within legislative institutions.

Grounded in the theoretical distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic motivators and the documented influence of performance systems on employee perceptions, the present study advances the following hypothesis:

**H1: There is a statistically significant positive relationship between job performance**

### **3. Data and Methodology**

This study adopts a quantitative research design to examine the relationship between job performance assessments and employee motivation at the Limpopo Provincial Legislature. The methodological choices were guided by the study's objective to test a hypothesized relationship between clearly defined variables within a specific institutional context.

#### **Research Design**

A structured, cross-sectional survey design was employed. Research design provides the procedural framework that guides data collection and analysis to ensure valid and reliable findings (Creswell, 2021 ). Given the study's focus on examining relationships between measurable constructs, a structured design was appropriate to ensure systematic data generation and analytical rigor.

#### **Research Approach and Philosophy**

The study followed a quantitative approach. Quantitative research enables the collection and statistical analysis of numerical data to explain relationships between variables (Boru, 2018 ). This approach is particularly suitable where the objective is hypothesis testing and the evaluation of established theoretical propositions.

The research was underpinned by a positivist philosophy. Positivism assumes that social reality can be objectively observed, measured, and analyzed using structured methodologies (Saunders et al., 2019 ). The positivist orientation aligns with the study's aim to examine the statistical association between job performance assessments (independent variable) and employee motivation (dependent variable), while minimizing researcher bias and enhancing replicability.

#### **Research Strategy**

A survey strategy, situated within a case study context, was adopted. Survey strategies are frequently associated with positivist research and allow for the efficient collection of quantitative data from a defined population (Saunders et al., 2019 ). The case study context—the Limpopo Provincial Legislature—enabled an in-depth empirical investigation of performance management practices within a real-world institutional setting.

#### **Population and Sampling**

The target population comprised all 190 employees of the Limpopo Provincial Legislature across sixteen departments. To enhance representativeness and generalizability within the institutional context, probability sampling was applied. Specifically, simple random sampling ensured that each member of the population had an equal chance of selection (Bougie & Sekaran, 2019 ).

Sample size determination was guided by Krejcie and Morgan's (1970, cited in Bougie & Sekaran, 2019 ) sample size tables, which recommended 127 respondents for a population of 190. This calculation was cross-verified using the Raosoft sample size calculator at a 5% margin of error, ensuring statistical adequacy for hypothesis testing.

### **Data Collection**

Primary data were collected using a self-administered, structured questionnaire. Structured questionnaires are consistent with quantitative designs and facilitate standardized measurement across respondents (Boru, 2018 ).

The instrument comprised two sections:

- **Section A** captured demographic characteristics (gender, age, experience, department).
- **Section B** contained 18 items measured on a five-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree). These items were aligned with the study's research objectives and assessed perceptions of performance assessment processes, tools utilized, and the motivational environment.

The use of a Likert scale enabled quantification of employee perceptions and facilitated statistical analysis of relationships between constructs.

### **Data Analysis**

Consistent with the positivist and quantitative orientation of the study, statistical analysis was conducted to test the hypothesized relationship between job performance assessments and employee motivation. The analytical strategy focused on examining the strength and significance of the association between the independent and dependent variables, in line with the stated hypothesis.

## **4. Results**

### **Sample Characteristics**

A total of 130 employees of the Limpopo Provincial Legislature participated in the study . The sample reflected a mature and institutionally experienced workforce. The largest age cohort was 36–45 years (42.3%), followed by 46–55 years (23.8%). Organizational tenure was substantial, with 33.8% reporting 5–8 years of service and 29.2% more than nine years . This demographic profile enhances the credibility of responses, as participants possessed sustained exposure to the performance management system.

A notable proportion (23.8%) declined to disclose departmental affiliation, potentially reflecting sensitivity within a politically structured environment, consistent with concerns raised by Kopo et al. (2021) .

## Perceptions of Performance Assessments and Motivation

### Performance Assessment Anxiety

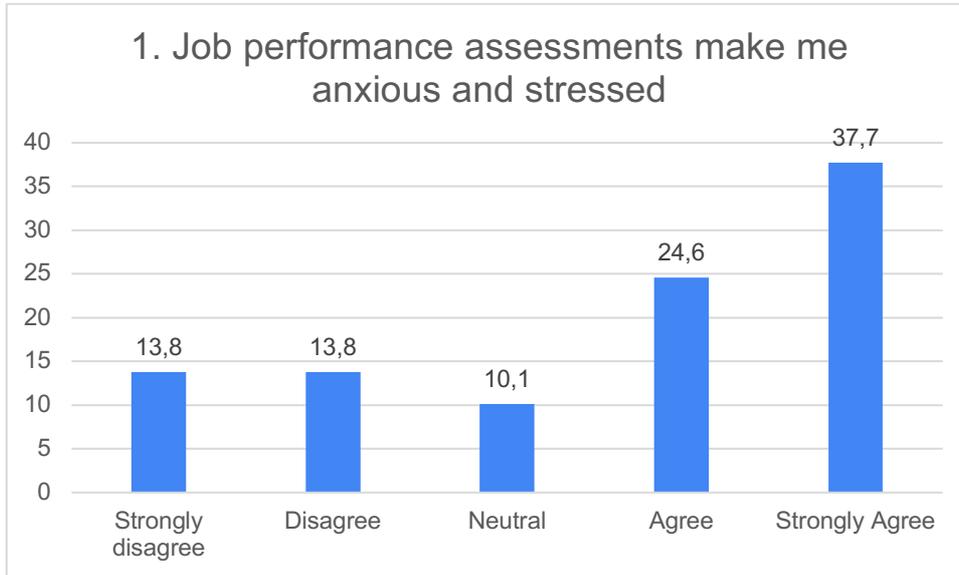


Figure 1: Job performance assessments make me anxious and stressed.

A substantial majority (62.3%) agreed or strongly agreed that job performance assessments induce anxiety and stress. This finding aligns with Naseeb et al. (2019), who argue that performance evaluations perceived as punitive or opaque can generate demotivation. The prevalence of anxiety suggests that the current system may undermine intrinsic motivation by positioning assessment as surveillance rather than developmental support.

### Perceived Fairness

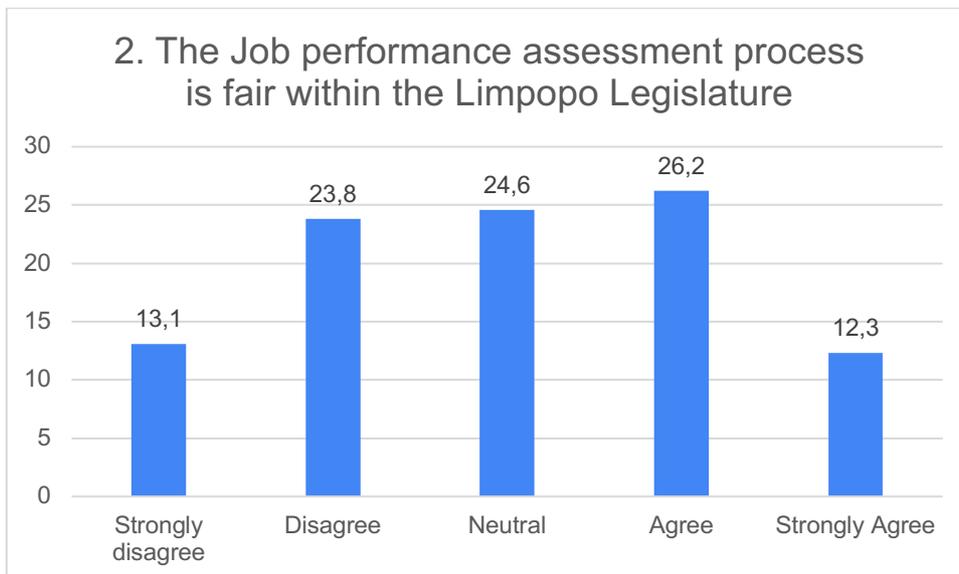


Figure 2: The Job performance assessment process is fair within the Limpopo Legislature

Perceptions of procedural fairness were divided. While 38.5% viewed the system as fair, 36.9% disagreed, and 24.6% remained neutral. The absence of consensus is analytically significant. As Johnson et al. (2019)

emphasize, procedural justice is central to sustaining employee motivation. Ambivalence and perceived unfairness may therefore weaken trust in management processes and dilute motivational effects. Transparency concerns, further highlighted in the manuscript, reinforce this interpretation. As noted, limited communication fosters mistrust and undermines legitimacy (Johnson et al., 2019) .

### Incentives and Extrinsic Motivation

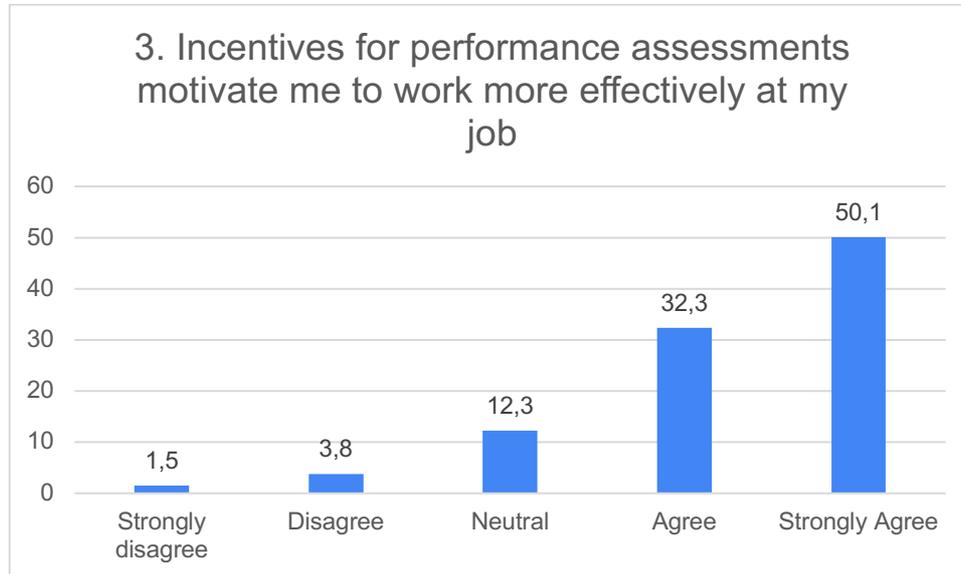


Figure 3: Incentives for performance assessments motivate me to work more effectively at my job

In contrast, 82.4% of respondents indicated that incentives motivate them to work more effectively . This strong endorsement of extrinsic rewards supports Esteve and Schuster's (2019) argument regarding the motivational power of monetary incentives and benefit structures in public sector contexts.

The juxtaposition of high incentive endorsement and elevated assessment anxiety reveals a structural tension: while rewards are valued, the mechanism through which performance is evaluated generates apprehension. This indicates that motivational potential is contingent upon the credibility and fairness of the evaluation process.

### Inferential Analysis

Reliability testing demonstrated excellent internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha = 0.959), exceeding the accepted threshold of 0.7 .

Correlation analysis revealed a strong and statistically significant positive relationship between perceptions of job performance assessments and employee motivation (Pearson  $r = 0.855$ ,  $p < 0.000$ ; Spearman  $r = 0.846$ ,  $p < 0.000$ ) .

This constitutes the central empirical contribution of the study. The strength of the association confirms that performance assessment systems are deeply intertwined with motivational outcomes within this public sector setting. However, as acknowledged in the manuscript, correlation does not imply causation . Importantly, descriptive findings suggest that the current system may exert a demotivating influence due to anxiety, perceived unfairness, and limited developmental follow-through . Thus, the relationship identified is not merely statistically significant but substantively consequential. Reforming procedural justice, transparency, and developmental integration may enable the Legislature to convert this strong relationship into a positive motivational mechanism.

## 5. Management Implications

The study sought to determine how job performance assessments relate to employee motivation at the Limpopo Legislature . The findings yield several managerial implications.

First, incentives and compensation are powerful motivational drivers . This underscores the necessity of aligning performance outcomes with tangible rewards in a structured and transparent manner.

Second, high levels of anxiety surrounding performance reviews indicate that the process is perceived as evaluative rather than developmental . Transitioning from a compliance-oriented model to a continuous feedback system is therefore essential. Lee, Idris, and Tuckey (2019) advocate ongoing, development-focused performance conversations, while Govender and Bussin (2020) emphasize empowerment and clear communication as drivers of engagement. Similarly, Patel and Chang (2019) highlight the role of supportive management in improving public sector performance .

Third, employees expressed a desire for a more favourable work environment that enhances performance. This signals the need for improved communication, structured training opportunities, and formalised promotion pathways grounded in assessment outcomes.

Collectively, these implications reinforce that performance management systems must integrate fairness, transparency, leadership capability, and reward alignment to sustain motivation.

## 6. Recommendations

Drawing directly from the findings, the following recommendations were advanced:

### **Revamp the Performance Assessment Process**

Move away from once-a-year, compliance-driven reviews toward continuous, development-focused feedback mechanisms. Lee, Idris, and Tuckey (2019) demonstrate the motivational benefits of ongoing performance dialogue . Manager training should prioritise constructive feedback, empowerment, and mentorship (Govender & Bussin, 2020), alongside supportive management practices (Patel & Chang, 2019) .

### **Strengthen Performance–Reward Alignment**

Formalise a transparent, performance-based incentive structure. Esteve and Schuster (2019) emphasize the motivational salience of monetary incentives in public sector environments. Recognition mechanisms and formal awards have also been shown to positively influence motivation (Ali et al., 2021) .

### **Integrate Assessment with Development**

Performance outcomes should mandatorily inform individual development plans (IDPs). Dedicated training resources linked to identified competency gaps can enhance motivation and capability development, as suggested by Arulsamy et al. (2023) .

### **Invest in Leadership Development**

Implement transformational leadership training to cultivate empowerment, communication clarity, and intrinsic motivation (Yin et al., 2020) .

## 7. Conclusion

This study examined the relationship between job performance assessments and employee motivation within the Limpopo Provincial Legislature. The findings demonstrate a strong and statistically significant positive association between perceptions of performance assessments and employee motivation ( $r = 0.855$ ,

$p < 0.000$ ) . This confirms that performance management functions as a high-impact human resource mechanism within this public sector context.

However, the descriptive results reveal a structural tension within the current system. While employees strongly endorse performance-linked incentives as motivational drivers , a substantial proportion report anxiety associated with performance reviews and express ambivalence regarding procedural fairness . These findings align with prior research indicating that perceived procedural justice and transparency are central to sustaining motivation (Johnson et al., 2019), and that poorly designed appraisal systems may undermine employee engagement (Naseeb et al., 2019).

The study therefore concludes that performance assessments at the Legislature are not motivationally neutral instruments; rather, they are deeply intertwined with employee attitudes and behavioural outcomes. Where assessments are perceived as fair, transparent, and development-oriented, they hold significant potential to enhance motivation. Conversely, when experienced as stressful or procedurally ambiguous, they may constrain motivational gains despite the presence of strong extrinsic incentives.

Importantly, the findings reinforce the relevance of aligning performance systems with reward structures and developmental processes. Consistent with Esteve and Schuster (2019), monetary and recognition-based incentives play a critical motivational role in public sector settings . Moreover, leadership behaviours characterised by empowerment, communication clarity, and supportive management practices are essential for strengthening engagement (Govender & Bussin, 2020; Patel & Chang, 2019) . Integrating assessment outcomes into structured development planning further enhances motivational capacity (Arulsamy et al., 2023) .

In sum, this study contributes empirical evidence from a South African provincial legislature demonstrating that performance management systems operate as strategic levers of employee motivation. The strength of the observed relationship underscores the necessity of designing appraisal systems that embed procedural justice, transparency, reward alignment, and developmental integration. By reforming the architecture of performance assessments, public sector organisations can more effectively harness their motivational potential and enhance overall organisational effectiveness.

### **Theoretical and Empirical Contributions**

This study makes several contributions to the human resource management literature.

First, it provides empirical evidence from a South African provincial legislature demonstrating a strong and statistically significant relationship between job performance assessments and employee motivation ( $r = 0.855$ ,  $p < 0.000$ ) . While prior studies have examined performance management and motivation, evidence from subnational public sector institutions in developing contexts remains limited. By situating the analysis within the Limpopo Provincial Legislature, this study extends understanding of performance management dynamics in politically structured public organisations.

Second, the findings refine the theoretical understanding of performance management as a multidimensional motivational mechanism. Although incentives are strongly endorsed as motivational drivers , substantial proportions of employees report anxiety and express mixed perceptions of procedural fairness . This demonstrates that performance management systems are not inherently motivational; rather, their impact depends on perceptions of fairness, transparency, and developmental orientation, consistent with Johnson et al. (2019) and Naseeb et al. (2019).

Third, the study highlights the structural tension between extrinsic reward alignment and procedural justice within public sector performance systems. The evidence suggests that reward salience alone is insufficient

if appraisal processes generate stress or ambiguity. This contributes to HRM scholarship by reinforcing the importance of system coherence—aligning evaluation processes, incentives, and developmental practices as an integrated architecture rather than isolated mechanisms.

### **Practical Implications**

The findings carry significant implications for HR practitioners and public sector managers.

First, given the strong association between performance assessments and motivation, performance management systems should be treated as strategic levers rather than administrative routines. Reform efforts must prioritise procedural justice, transparency, and communication, as perceptions of fairness directly shape motivational outcomes (Johnson et al., 2019).

Second, the strong endorsement of incentives underscores the necessity of formalising transparent performance–reward linkages. Aligning assessment outcomes with tangible rewards is critical in sustaining motivation, consistent with Esteve and Schuster (2019) and Ali et al. (2021).

Third, elevated anxiety surrounding performance reviews signals the need to shift from compliance-driven appraisal to development-focused feedback systems. Continuous feedback, leadership empowerment, and structured development planning (Lee et al., 2019; Govender & Bussin, 2020; Patel & Chang, 2019; Arulsamy et al., 2023) enhance both intrinsic and extrinsic motivational pathways.

Collectively, the study suggests that public sector organisations can strengthen employee motivation by redesigning performance management systems to integrate fairness, reward alignment, leadership capability, and developmental follow-through.

### **Limitations**

This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged.

First, the research was confined to a single public sector organisation—the Limpopo Provincial Legislature. As such, the findings may not be generalisable to the broader Limpopo public sector or other governmental contexts.

Second, the sample was restricted to employees available during lunch, tea, and after-work breaks. This constraint may have influenced response quality, as time limitations could have resulted in hurried or less reflective answers.

Third, although a strong correlation was identified, the cross-sectional design does not permit causal inference. The findings therefore establish association rather than directional causality between performance assessments and employee motivation.

Despite these limitations, the study provides robust, contextually grounded evidence that performance management systems are central determinants of motivational outcomes within public sector institutions.

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